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RollingStone

THE CREATORS ISSUE

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THE SHOCKING LOSS OF A FOO FIGHTER

BELLA POARCH
FROM THE NAVY TO VIRAL POP HITMAKER

CLASS OF 2022
SOCIAL MEDIA'S HOTTEST RISING STARS

"F#ck the past. I'm trying to conquer the future."

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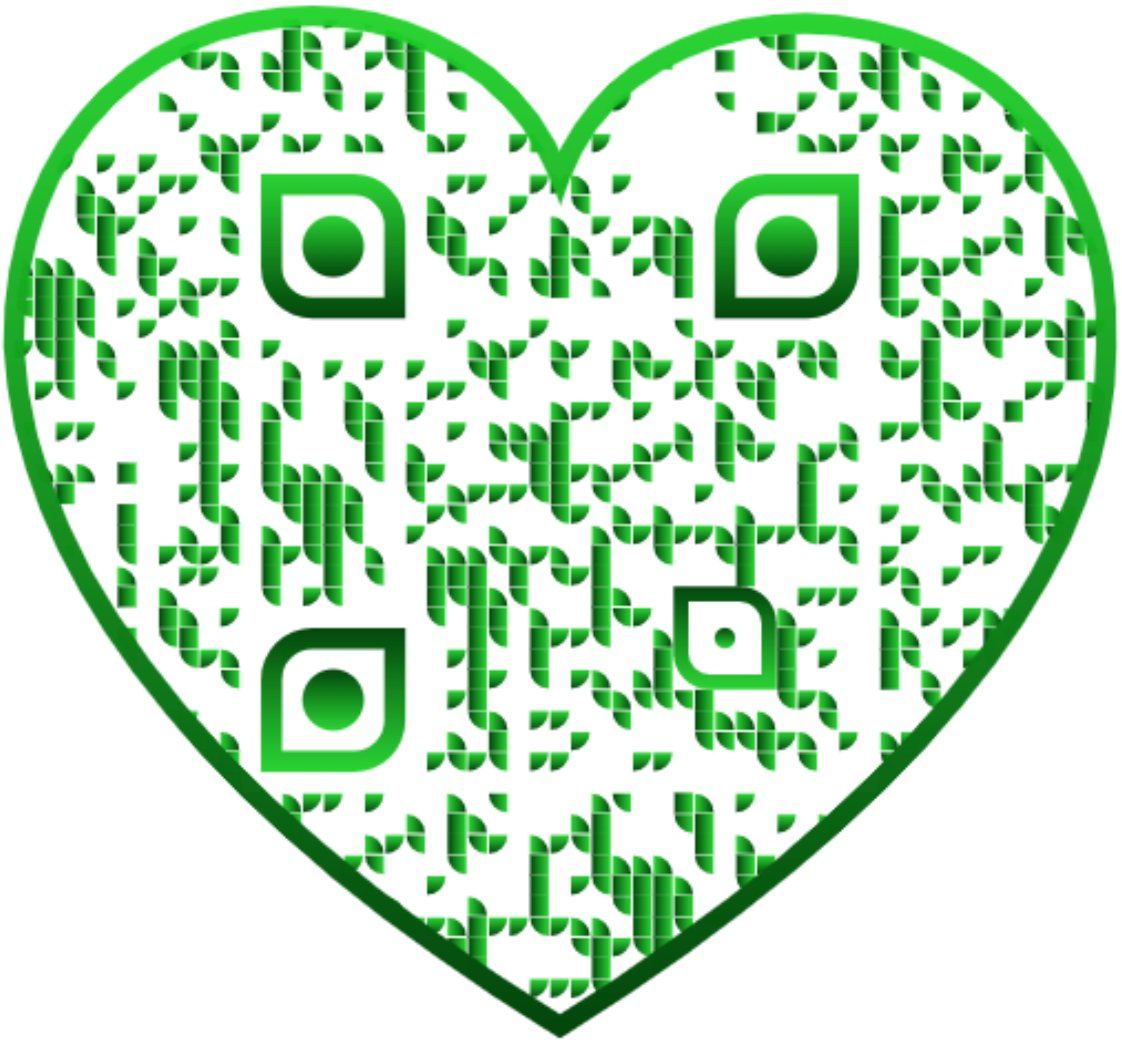

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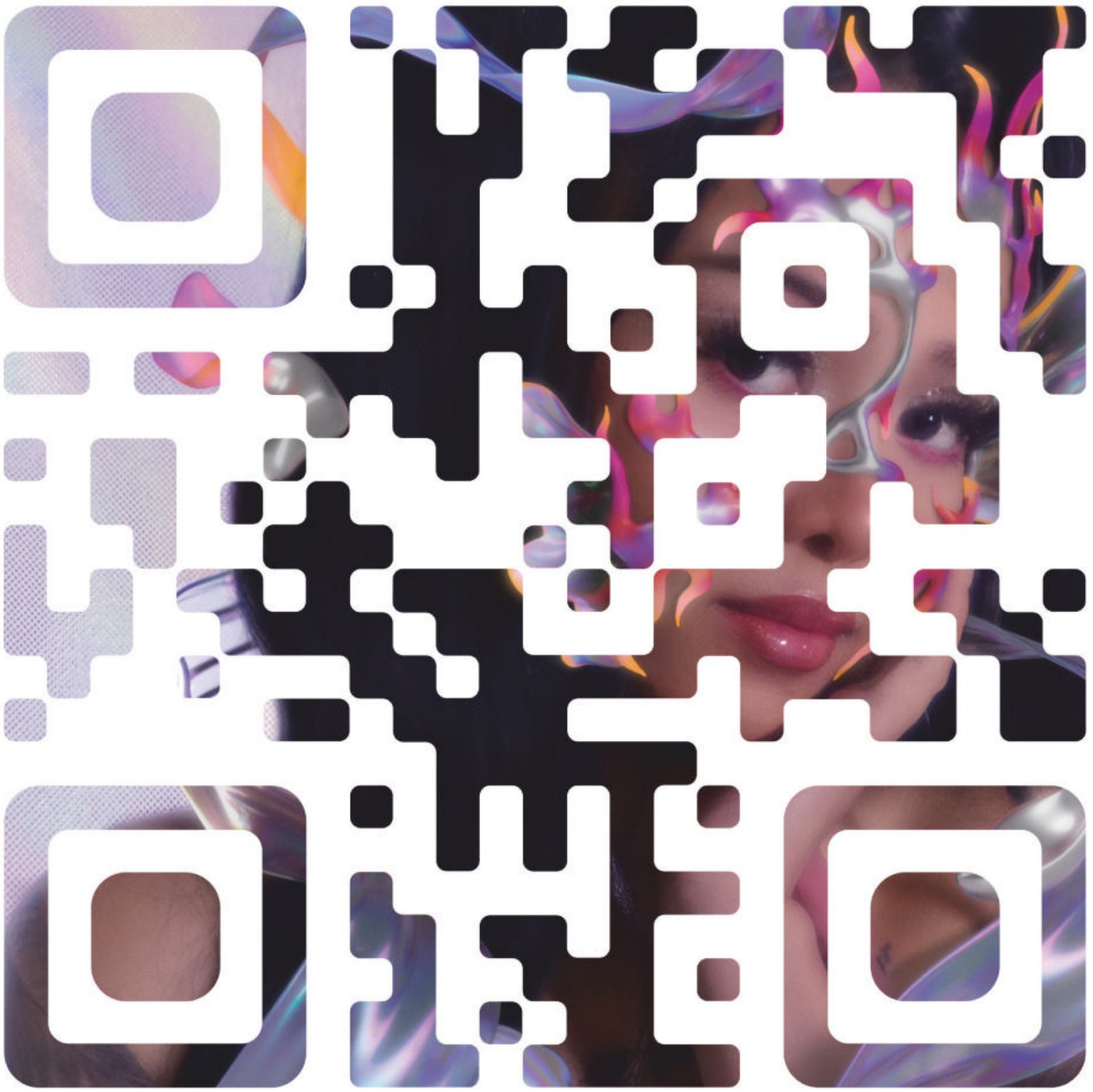

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CREATORS TO

BY TARA AQUINO

The number of content creators on the internet is limitless. With the advent of platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, an abundant, lucrative, digital creative world is at your fingertips if you have access to a phone. And as our social feeds continue to fill with an abundance of content, it begs the question: What does it take for a creator to stand out? Drive, talent, vision, and purpose are the answer.

Look no further than the influential creators that we've featured here. They're owning their spaces, expanding what's possible, and innovating the future. Not only do they create, but they observe, connect, and keep impact in mind:

SWOPES

Elise Swopes, or just @swopes, has been at the forefront of the digital art space since the early days of Instagram. As the landscape evolved, so has her work. Now, she's at the forefront of NFT art, thanks to her signature surrealist cityscapes.

But those aren't the only possibilities she sees in the new medium – there's also an abundance of opportunity for women of color. "It is a very heavy load, but it's not one that I would give up because I see that it's worth it just by the peer ability for ownership, the peer ability for generational wealth, the peer ability for innovation and equity," says Swopes.

Her new work takes her advocacy even further: She's working with incarcerated artists to put their artwork on the blockchain, creating an accessible digital gallery that their family members can visit. "I just want people to understand what art can do for other people."

KAREN X CHENG

If you need some levity in your life, head to Karen X. Cheng's Instagram and Facebook (@karenxcheng). There, the director, creative director, and queen of viral content shares a vast array of mind-bending videos and the behind-the-scenes scoop on making them. It's something she's had years of experience doing, since developing the Donut Selfie, which earned her 1MM views in a single day.

The drive behind her ideas? "It's when you have an idea, and it's uncomfortable for you to hold it in your head. You just want to create it and make it." Karen says. "I actively say, 'Nothing has to have a point. You just do it.' I've realized that my best ideas come from when I'm playing around."

It's that ease that's characterized her content with positivity, education, and exploration. Now, she's exploring another medium. With Meta, she's completely redesigning choreography from the ground up, specifically for virtual reality. The project is just the latest testament that her creativity knows no bounds.

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WATCH

EITAN BERNATH

Eitan Bernath (@eitan) is sitting atop an empire zhe has built himself, and he's only 19-years-old. He is a chef, a social media sensation, author and entertainer, recurring on *The Drew Barrymore Show*. He has amassed a following of 3.1MM on Facebook.

He started in the kitchen at just eight years old, and by 11, he got his break as a contestant on *Chopped*. With that exposure, the prodigy took his talents to Instagram, where he quickly found an audience creating simple cooking videos. "People love inspirational content," Eitan says. "To me, the key elements of every video are the visuals being strong, the lighting's good, the food looks great, the energy's there."

It's tempting to dismiss internet fame as chance, catching the right wave at the right time. But Eitan. "I'm an analytics nerd. I like to figure out new concepts and really hone what I'm doing by looking at the data. Sometimes people will be like, 'You're so lucky that you grew so fast.' Obviously, there's luck involved, but it's pretty calculated."

AMBER WHITTINGTON

An activist, creator, and host, Amber Whittington, the heart of @amberscloset, has made a name for herself by creating a safe and accessible online space for the LGBTQIA community. It started with her posting YouTube videos for STEMs, which she describes as androgyny and the cross-section between stud and fem—since she didn't see these types of resources available to understand herself.

Her platform has since evolved into a forum to discuss even the most taboo topics. On her Instagram, you'll find tips on everything from emotional boundary setting to sexual pleasure and social justice.

Now, she's a board member at Lamba–an organization fighting for the civil rights of the LGBTQIA community—and continues to speak at conferences and panels worldwide. "Over time, I just started being like, 'I got to talk about more serious topics and do it in a way that's digestible.'"

RALPH LAUREN'S

POLO SHIRT

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NEW YORK

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ISSUE 1363
'ALL THE NEWS
THAT FITS'

The Mighty Diamonds

Reggae suffered a pair of unthinkable losses this spring when Donald "Tabby Diamond" Shaw, singer of iconic trio the Mighty Diamonds, was murdered at age 66 — followed days later by the death of the same group's Fitzroy "Bunny Diamond" Simpson, 70, due to complications from diabetes. "Whoever took Tabby's life has robbed a music, robbed a culture, robbed the world," said producer Gussie Clarke.

Lloyd "Judge" Ferguson, Shaw, and Simpson (from left) in 1986

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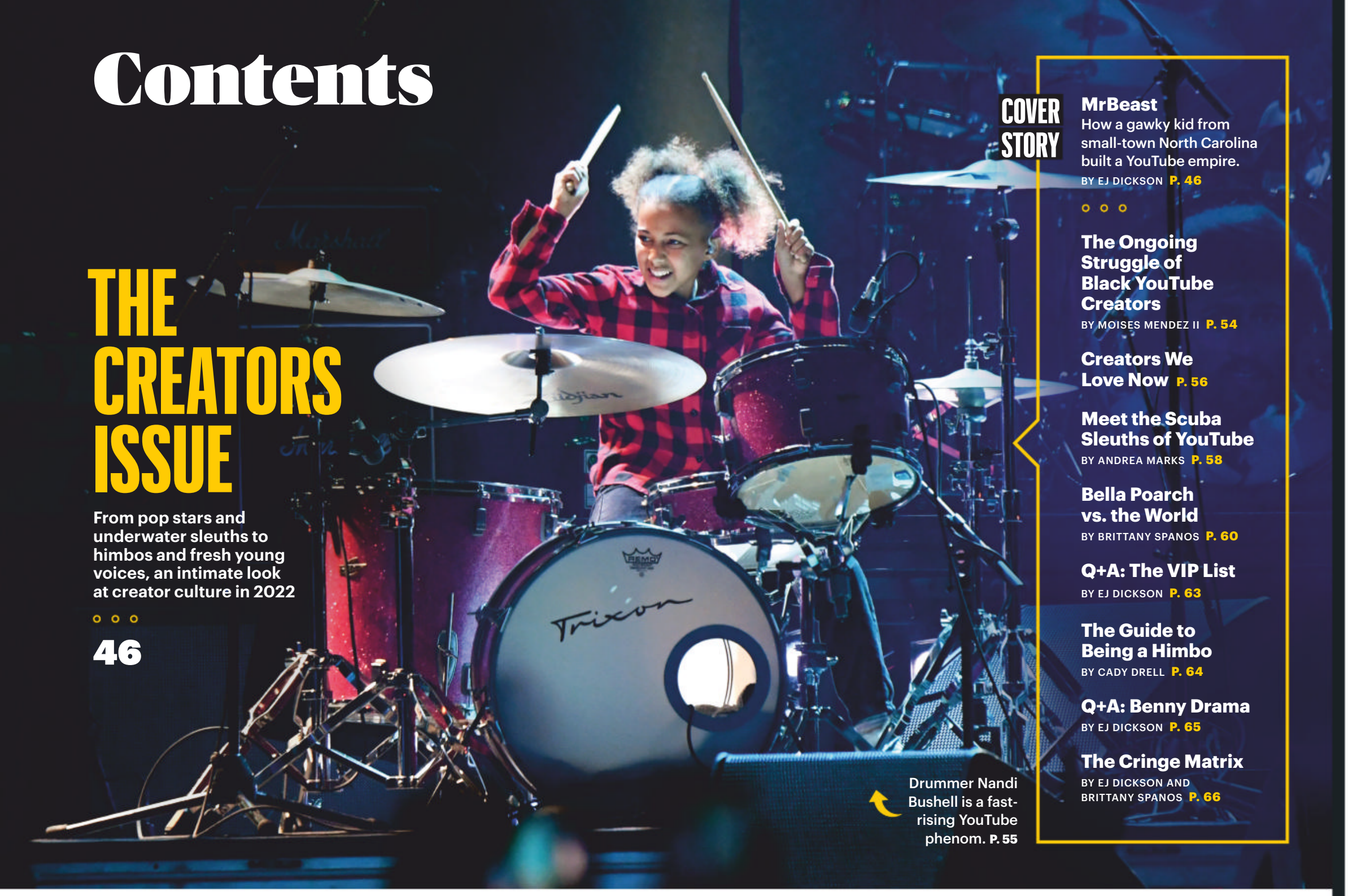

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MrBeast photographed in Greenville, North Carolina, on March 10, 2022, by **Matthias Clamer**.

Fashion direction by Alex Badia. Styling by Stephanie Tricola. Grooming by Amanda Wilson. Prop styling by Dominique Barnes. T-shirt by Rag & Bone. Jeans by Levi's.

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Opening Act

Benito's Excellent Adventure

BAD BUNNY'S LIFE THESE DAYS is one victory lap after another. He kicked off the year by celebrating his 2020 album *El Último Tour del Mundo* — an ambitious LP inspired by the idea of the last tour on Earth — with an appropriately awesome IRL tour of U.S. arenas. The shows delivered on the album's live-wire energy with performances of songs like the moody alt-rock anthem "Maldita Pobreza" and the clubby megahit "Dákiti," and left fans hungry for more. Luckily, Bad Bunny wasn't even close to done. The tour's final stop in Miami coincided with the Grammys, where *El Último Tour* took home the first-ever Best Música Urbana Album trophy; and the Puerto Rican superstar will be back soon for an even bigger U.S. stadium tour that starts in August. "Yesterday I finished a stage of my career in the best possible way," he tweeted in Spanish after the Grammys. "Now, yes — we're ready for what's next."

Bad Bunny at Brooklyn's Barclays Center in March

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Sacha Lecca**

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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, W

New York's Scrappiest Rock Band Glows Up

For the three musicians in Sunflower Bean, the pandemic unlocked a new sense of freedom

Nick Kivlen, Julia Cumming, and Olive Faber (from left) in New York

PHOTOGRAPH BY Evelyn Freja

Cumming and Kivlen at New York's Governors Ball in 2019

SUNFLOWER BEAN

IN THE SPRING OF 2020, Julia Cumming felt lost. The pandemic had just shut down live music, disrupting countless livelihoods, and for Sunflower Bean – the New York rock trio with such a ceaseless commitment to performing in bars, clubs, and theaters that they were once named the city's hardest-working band by a local listings site – it hit with particularly dizzying force.

"Those first 10 weeks were bleak," says Cumming, Sunflower Bean's bassist and one of two lead singers in the band. "So much of my self-worth was based on being a performer. All the parts of myself that I liked. Having that removed was like an identity crisis."

Stuck at home in Manhattan as the virus raged outside her door, she didn't know where to begin. Neither did Nick Kivlen, the band's guitarist and co-lead vocalist, who hunkered down with his parents on Long Island and gave up on ever touring again.

"I was like, 'Well, I had a really crazy early twenties, and I'm glad I got all those experiences,'" says Kivlen. He compares the feeling that followed to "an ego death: 'I don't really matter at all. My art doesn't matter.'"

Olive Faber, the band's drummer, spent the early weeks of 2020 wrestling with a deeper existential question at her Brooklyn apartment. By the time lockdown began, she was on her way to realizing that the male identity she'd been living uneasily with for years was all wrong. "The pandemic truly gave me the time to sit with myself, and try to figure out who I am off of tour," says Faber. "And in that time, my egg cracked. I realized I was trans. I *am* trans."

If the pandemic era began as the hardest thing Sunflower Bean had ever been through, it ended up bringing an electrifying new sense of freedom and closeness to a group that began when all three members, now 26 and 27, were in their teens. Their third album, *Headful of Sugar*, is a riotous rush of melodic hooks, adventurous production, and an uncontainable passion for life that the last two years have only made stronger.

When Sunflower Bean began in 2013, their loud riffs and theatrical flair made them an oddity in Brooklyn's indie-rock scene. "We played so many shows to empty rooms, but there wasn't another option," Kivlen says. Soon, their constant gigs paid off in steadily building praise for their first two albums. "Signing a record deal when you're 19 is a very adult experience," Kivlen adds. "But then there are certain things that you don't get to experience, like having a long-term relationship or having your own apartment."

By late spring 2020, Sunflower Bean had been apart for longer than any time since they formed the band. Cumming adopted a senior cockapoo ("She's 17 pounds of cuteness, she sleeps 18 hours a day, and she's the love of my life"), started antidepressants, and began to see a way out of the fix they were in. After a first, tentative backyard band meeting, they decided to get back to work at a rented house upstate.

Writing and recording in the Catskills was new for Sunflower Bean. "We've never been a band that's like, 'Let's go to a cabin in the woods and make an album,'" Faber notes wryly. But it worked. "Things were pretty desperate when we weren't together," Cumming says. "By the time we were all able to be in the same place, things started flowing."

FAST FACTS

SUNFLOWER SEEDS
"My first memory is of being like, 'I want to be in the Beatles,'" says Cumming. "Four years old, in the playground."

SEE YA!
Kivlen and Faber spent a year each in college before bailing to focus on the band. "I was like, 'I have a gig at Death by Audio tonight. I'm not going to be doing the reading,'" Kivlen recalls.

THE MAESTRO
Faber cites Mike Dean, the Houston legend who's worked with Kanye and Travis Scott, as a key influence on the new LP's big, bold sound.

Unplugged from city life, Kivlen found himself writing songs with a new ease. "All of a sudden, for the first time ever, when we were writing I felt like I didn't have one hand tied behind my back," he says.

That summer is also when Faber came out to her bandmates, following through on a process of self-discovery that had begun the prior year. She connects it to her decision to quit drinking during a 2019 tour with Beck and Cage the Elephant: "Once I stopped, that made space in my brain and heart for other things about myself," she says.

After that tour, she faced feelings she'd been pushing away for a long time. "The biggest cracking moment was when I shaved my mustache in January 2020," Faber says. "I would look in the mirror, and it never made sense to me. Once I shaved it, I saw my face, and I was like, 'Oh, I'm a girl.'"

Months later, talking to Cumming and Kivlen, Faber felt a sense of relief. "They're pretty much my closest friends, and it took a lot to even come out to them at first," she adds. "But they've been nothing but supportive."

With their time in the Catskills ending, Sunflower Bean returned to New York and met up with producer and engineer Jake Portrait (Alex G, Empath) at his Brooklyn studio. "We started to approach the recording like, 'Fuck it – four-bar drum loop,'" says Faber, who engineered *Headful of Sugar* alongside Portrait. "We weren't afraid to let go of rock-band clichés."

Those production choices mirror a newly bold approach to songwriting and vocals. Cumming cites her lyrics on "Stand by Me," an insistently catchy pop song questioning a partner's dedication ("You want a girl who sits back and takes it/That's not the way that I play"). "When you're performing and you're a woman, you think about the fact that by the time you're 36, you're expected to be a mom," she says. "That gives me 10 more years of being seen as a person with value. That does inform some of the confrontational elements of this record. . . . Having to at least consider throwing that away for the chance to prioritize making art."

Cumming, Kivlen, and Faber all sound excited about getting back to touring this year, strengthened by the new senses of self they've each developed.

"I made a lot of friends during the last year that don't think of me as a musician at all," Kivlen says. "I'm dating someone right now who has only seen me play a show once."

Faber began telling people her new first name, Olive, in December. "It took me a minute to be like, 'This is my name,'" she says. "But it feels like me, which is crazy, because the name I was given never did."

Cumming, for her part, has found a new perspective on what makes her life meaningful. "The only thing that matters is: Are you happy with the people you're around? Are you safe? Are you healthy? Do you have love?" she says. "There's been sacrifice, heartache, and pain. But making music is worth fighting for." **SIMON VOZICK-LEVINSON**

PREVIOUS PAGE: HAIR STYLED AND COLORED BY CHELSEY PICKTHORN. MAKEUP BY ANDREW D'ANGELO FOR LOVE+CRAFT+BEAUTY. STYLING BY AMBER SIMIRIGLIA. CUMMING AND FABER: DRESSES BY DANA FOLEY. KIVLEN: JACKET BY THE KOOPLES. THIS PAGE: SACHA LECCA

PHOTOS

Euphoria on the Dance Floor

EWEN SPENCER spent the late Nineties at the center of a London nightlife boom. Flush with end-of-history optimism and irreverent British snark, a new generation fostered an environment where subcultures could thrive and parties could run wild. Working for the upstart magazine *Sleazenation,* Spencer spent his weekends snapping photos of late-night euphoria that appeared alongside club listings and reviews in the back pages. More than 20 years later, Spencer has collected his photos from this era in a new book, *While You Were Sleeping, 1998-2000.* Lately, Spencer says, he's seen signs of that old energy coming back. "Clubbing now is almost replicating what we're seeing in these pictures," he says. "People are harking back to this era." JON BLISTEIN

▲ A MOMENT OF HOPE

"The Nineties were our Sixties," Spencer says of the hope coursing through Britain's nightlife boom. "It felt like something was changing — we had a new government, and people were really optimistic at that time."

▼ GET DOWN

Early in the evening, Spencer would often chat with the partiers. Later on, less so. "When it's two in the morning and people are swinging off the light fittings, I know what I'm going to be doing," he quips.

▼ KICK IT OUT

DJ-producer Keb Darge, who got his start in the Northern Soul scene, cuts loose at his "Deep Funk" night. "He was a great soul dancer back in the day," says Spencer.

◀ LATE-NIGHT TALES

"I'd look for characters," Spencer says of his approach to club photography. "I'd grown up in that era of Ecstasy coming to the forefront and parties moving away from soul music and hip-hop into house. So when I went into these spaces, I had a vernacular."

◀ GARAGE JAMS

Outside London, Spencer says the working-class atmosphere of club life was even more pronounced: "Even though these kids don't work in factories anymore, there's still that [idea] of 'Work hard, play hard.'"

While You Were Sleeping
Damiani, $50

EWEN SPENCER, 5

SPOTLIGHT

Anitta: Brazil's Fearless, Fun Superstar

ONE DAY IN MARCH, Anitta woke up, groggy and a little hungover, and found out she was the biggest artist in the world. Her slinky, sex-positive song "Envolver" had just topped Spotify's global charts, making her the first Brazilian artist to ever reach that spot with a solo single.

"My cellphone is going crazy," Anitta says on a Zoom call from Rio later that day, flashing a radiant smile and sounding a little breathless from all the excitement. "It's in all the newspapers, the TV news, everything. The whole country is literally, like, stopped." She was rehearsing for Coachella, where she would again make history, as the first Brazilian artist to perform on the festival's main stage, and preparing to release her new album, *Versions of Me*.

> "I made this album thinking of me. If I love it, it's good. I don't need anyone else to love it."

The album, more than three years in the making, is an ecstatic, trilingual synthesis of global sounds – fearless, fun, and audacious, like Anitta herself. Many of the songs were inspired by her adventures – and misadventures – in love, sex, and romance. "I like to write about something that's in my head in the moment, and I change boyfriends as much as I change my panties," she says. "I fall in love so quick, and I just forget them even faster."

Anitta's refreshingly open, completely unfiltered personality has made her such a beloved figure in Brazil that people have urged her to run for president, and she's spoken out against the country's conservative leader, Jair Bolsonaro. "I'm doing a campaign for the young people to register to vote," she says. "That's how we're going to take this motherfucking president out of the command of the country, because we don't deserve this shit."

Anitta never minces words, and it's part of what makes *Versions of Me* feel so liberated. "I made this album thinking of me," she says. "I hate expectations, so I don't think about it. If I love it, it's good. I don't need anyone else to love it." JULYSSA LOPEZ

Anitta at a rehearsal space in Rio

ARTIST YOU NEED TO KNOW

Lucky Daye: Exquisite Taste and Soul for Days

WHEN LUCKY DAYE talks about his album *Candydrip,* he sounds like a master chef. "I wanted this to be about taste," says the R&B singer, 36. "You might get supersweet, or you might get supersavory." The album is split between upbeat pop tunes and slower, sexier numbers. One highlight, "NWA," isn't named for the pioneering rap group so much as a feeling about his own experience. "Growing up, when I heard the term 'NWA,' I never thought about the group," he says. "It was the way people perceived me. When I am in the elevator and somebody doesn't want to get in with me, it's probably because they are scared of me. People fear the greatness in me."

MEAGAN JORDAN

10-SECOND BIO

HOMETOWN
New Orleans

AWARD TOUR His 2021 EP, *Table for Two,* featuring duets with Joyce Wrice, Ari Lennox, Yebba, and others, won a Grammy for Best Progressive R&B Album in April.

STYLING BY ALEXANDER-JULIAN GIBBSON

Enter the Irresistible Scope Zone for breath so fresh, people want in.

Kills Millions of Bad Breath Germs

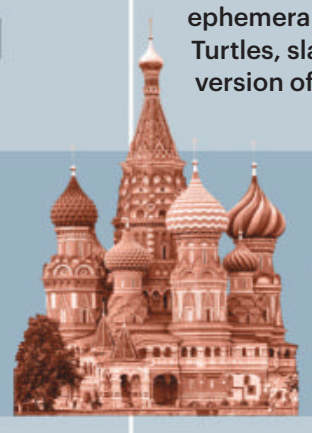
SCREEN TRENDS

Welcome to the Great Pinocchio Revival of 2022

Tilda Swinton

IT'S NO LIE: Somehow, there are three new adaptations of *Pinocchio*, the 1883 Italian novel about a wooden puppet who just wants to be a real boy, hitting the big screen this year. Which is for you? Take your pick. MARIA FONTOURA

	Pinocchio: A True Story	Disney's Pinocchio	Pinocchio
How to Watch	DVD and VOD available now	Releasing to Disney+ in late 2022	In theaters and on Netflix in December
Format	Animated	Live-action computer animation (think: *Space Jam* or *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*)	Stop-motion animation (think: *Coraline*)
Director	Vasiliy Rovenskiy	Robert Zemeckis	**Guillermo del Toro**
Star Power	Nineties icon **Pauly Shore** voices Pinocchio, while *Napoleon Dynamite*'s Jon Heder is his horse, Tybalt.	Tom Hanks as Geppetto, Joseph Gordon-Levitt as Jiminy Cricket, **Cynthia Erivo** as the Blue Fairy, Lorraine Bracco as new character Sofia the Seagull, and more.	Ewan McGregor as Jiminy Cricket and Tilda Swinton as "The Fairy With the Turquoise Hair." Plus: Cate Blanchett, John Turturro, Ron Perlman, Tim Blake Nelson, and Christoph Waltz.
What's the Take?	The classic tale retooled as a PG love story with updated references to pop-culture ephemera like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, slapstick comedy, and a whiny version of a tweenish Pinocchio.	A shiny new coat of paint on the family-friendly original, which will likely be an impressive blend of CGI and capital-A acting. Plus: new music by composer Alan Silvestri and pop producer Glen Ballard.	In typical del Toro style, a dark retelling set against the backdrop of the rise of fascism in 1930s Italy. The director has said that he is taking inspiration from **Frankenstein**.
Sign of Trouble?	Made and first released in **Russia**, the film earned such IMDb reviews as "The story is boring" and "Worst movie ever. Kids were sleeping."	Zemeckis was the third director to be attached to the project over its seven years in development, using a script that went through at least four writers.	The film was mired in development for nearly 14 years, with del Toro at one point setting his budget at a stiff $35 million that no studio wanted to cough up.
Expectations	If the viral reaction to the trailer is any indication — Shore briefly became a TikTok darling, with creators lip-syncing to it — this ***Pinocchio*** has cult classic written all over it.	Zemeckis and Hanks work well: ***Forrest Gump*** netted them each an Oscar (plus Best Picture), while *Cast Away* got Hanks another nod.	Though this is del Toro's first animated film, he's a master storyteller whose flair for supernatural thrills is unmatched. And he says he's never felt more connected to a character.
We Say			



FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: DISNEY/ALAMY; STEVEN FERDMAN/GETTY IMAGES; DAVID M. BENETT/GETTY IMAGES; MANDRAKETHEBLACK.DE/NETFLIX; VASILIS TSIKKINIS PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES; LIONSGATE; EVERETT COLLECTION, 2; ADRIEN COQUET/THE NOUN PROJECT

RECOMMENDS

OUR TOP POP-CULTURE PICKS OF THE MONTH

MOVIE

1. ‘Men’

Filmmaker Alex Garland (*Ex Machina*) returns with a tale of a woman (Jessie Buckley) grieving a lost loved one in the English countryside. She thinks someone may be stalking her, at which point things take a turn for the terrifying and deeply weird.

GAME

2. Quordle

For those who find Wordle too easy, Quordle challenges you to solve four Wordles at a time in nine tries. Each guessed word applies to all four puzzles, though each answer is different. It’s an exhilarating mental hellscape.

BOOK

3. ‘Anna, the Biography’

A dissection of one of fashion’s most controversial figures and a window into the glossy pages of *Vogue,* Amy Odell’s definitive Anna Wintour bio balances criticism with understanding and stories of true sadism: Imagine telling Oprah to lose 20 pounds for a cover.

PODCAST

4. ‘Punk in Translation: Latinx Origins’

In this Audible original, Tijuana No! singer Ceci Bastida challenges the idea of punk as music for white guys. Interviewing pioneers like Kid Congo Powers and Alice Bag, she walks through history, from Los Saicos to newer acts like Downtown Boys.

BOOK

5. ‘It Was All a Dream’

Justin Tinsley’s context-rich, deeply reported, elegantly written biography of the late Notorious B.I.G. is the latest sign that rap’s titans are finally getting the classic-rock-style treatment they deserve. Tinsley traces Biggie’s life story and rapid artistic development in far more detail than any previous chronicler, with a fan’s affection and a historian’s eye.

ALBUM

6. ‘Mobile Homies: Season 1’

Bay Area vet Lyrics Born is one of the most doggedly funky figures rap has known. Here the Japanese American MC teams with a slew of collaborators on a deeply pleasurable LP that includes an anti-Asian-hate anthem and grooves for days.

SONG

7. Angel Olsen’s “All the Good Times”

Olsen’s new single is a twangy tale of heartbreak and reflection, steeped in folk and Americana. There are tinges of Emmylou Harris here, a direction we hope she continues on her new album, *Big Time,* out June 3.

TOUR

8. Olivia Rodrigo

After a massive year, Rodrigo is finally going on her first proper tour, playing to arena audiences who have long had *Sour* memorized.

DOCUMENTARY

9. ‘Sheryl’

All she wanted to do was have some fun, but as we’re reminded in this illuminating doc about Sheryl Crow, along the way came sexual harassment, depression, Lance Armstrong, a Walmart ban, breast cancer, and tabloid rumors of a hookup with ex-boss Michael Jackson.

For reviews, premieres, and more, go to RollingStone.com/music

CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT: GUNPOWDER & SKY/SHOWTIME; KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES; BARRY BRECHEISEN/GETTY IMAGES; RITA FEREGRINO; A24; CLARENCE DAVIS/NY “DAILY NEWS” ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

MEET THE FUTURE OF MUSICA MEXICANA

GROWING UP in Washington state’s Yakima Valley, Yahritza Martínez and her four siblings were surrounded by Mexican music. One day, when Martínez was about five, her older brother, Mando, was practicing songs on his keyboard when everyone heard a big voice join him. “Out of nowhere, I hear this crazy high pitch,’” sister Adriana remembers. “I open the door and it’s Yahritza, singing a straight-up ranchera.”

When she was about 14, Martínez began uploading videos to TikTok and rapidly built a fan base with “musica Mexicana” covers. The term — a catchall for genres that include corridos, norteño, and banda — has found an audience online and inspired reggaeton artists like Karol G and Bad Bunny to experiment with these sounds. Now, with the backing of their label, Lumbre Music, Yahritza, Mando, and their brother Jairo are calling themselves Yahritza y Su Esencia and leading a generation taking Mexican music to surprising heights.

The group is at work on a five-song EP that tells the story of a relationship, from beginning to end. The big goal for all the Martínez siblings is to be able to help out their parents, a stay-at-home mom and a dad who works in the fields, but Yahritza, 15 and still in high school, has other aspirations, too: “My dream right now is to go on tour,” she says. “I want to see what it’s like.”

JULYSSA LOPEZ

PHILOSOPHY

Inside the Metaphysical Mind of Natasha Lyonne

Her show 'Russian Doll' plumbs the depths of existence. Here's what it's taught her about life

By ELISABETH GARBER-PAUL

"I'M DEEPLY CRACKED from a combination of Talmud and LSD," says Natasha Lyonne, flicking a cigarette in her hand from the couch of her Los Angeles home, where she's been chatting by Zoom for over an hour. She is attempting to explain the underpinnings of her show *Russian Doll,* a metaphysical mindfuck she writes, produces, and stars in, whose second season recently dropped on Netflix. Based on a character Lyonne had long imagined – essentially a hard-partying, alternate-reality version of herself named Nadia – the series explores the nature of life and death, goodness and regret, of memory, ghosts, family, and the New York City she loves. It is both extremely personal and universal. And also, because it's Lyonne, it's fucking hilarious.

Without Lyonne's vast swath of experiences – an intense early education at a Jewish yeshiva, where she learned about the Torah and the Talmud; time as an East Village junkie, seeing how much of that education she could forget – she probably wouldn't have had the range for, or the interest in, building such an intricate, multi-planed universe. In fact, it was in rehab that she became deeply interested in the metaphysical aspects of existence. "The thing that was most challenging for me, getting clean, is that you're supposed to rearrange your relationship to earthly things, so that you're not constantly being like, 'Oh, let me go smoke dope,' " she says. "Where a lot of people find comfort in church, I started reading a lot of science books, and finding comfort there." She devoured Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything* and Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day*. "It just made me walk into the world differently and think about all the things that I didn't know, which felt very grounding."

In *Russian Doll,* Lyonne revisits these themes with the help of a very qualified writers room ("these fucking brilliant women, just fucking Ivy League geniuses"), creating a show that questions not only the world but also our place within it. If Season One was largely based on the cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter's *I Am a Strange Loop,* the time travel that defines the new episodes comes from physicist Carlo Rovelli's *The Order of Time*. "It's really smacking wide open this idea of 'What if the nature of time is not as we experience it?' " Lyonne explains. "It's just fun as hell."

With all her accumulated expertise, we asked Lyonne to drop some knowledge on building the show's world – and understanding ours.

How Time Travel Works (or Doesn't)

It's really just asking the question of "What is this thing that I would go and change? What is that butterfly-effect event that I'm looking for?" We [in the writers room] thought a lot about, what would the rules be? Is it just a "kill Hitler" season? And it's like, well, of course, we all want to kill Hitler. But assuming we could make that machine, would you actually be able to do things like that? Nadia's not actually the center of the universe, she's just another bozo on the bus. For her and [fellow time looper] Alan, it really feels like the most you want to have them be able to do is handle their own case in a way, or at least try and fail to handle their own case but come away with a deeper understanding of what it is to be alive on the other side, having walked through that epigenetic footprint that was mapped onto them in a way where now they see their own trip differently, so that they can possibly be set up to enjoy the ride. It is pretty philosophical – therapeutic by way of quantum physics and high concept and multiverse, and time travel, and death loops and all these things.

Addressing the Big Questions

"How do we know we exist?" I think the bigger question is "Does it matter if we don't?" That sort of speaks to [the idea of us living in a] multiverse simulation as well, which is where, as a storyteller, I philosophically deviate from something that truly ends in magic. Because in a way it doesn't matter; it doesn't matter if the concept of karma is not real. Does it not seem that it would still be a life better lived to do unto others [as they would do to you]? Is it not helpful to think that it's better to not be a total fucking piece of shit in your daily dealings, and expect to have a lovely life and people that care about you? Probably wise to show up with some empathy in a life, even if life has no meaning. Even if none of this is anything, we've still got to go through it.

Essentially, I guess the questions that I'm always talking to my friends about, or in the books or movies that I'm curious about, are what is the game? And do we have the game all wrong? And why does it cause us suffering? And it's, of course, because we live in this material world – I don't mean financial; I mean, we actually are of this world. Whether we can see past it or beyond it or whatever doesn't change the fact that we all have bills, and relationships, parents, and we've got these weird bodies that we carry around and stuff. So there is no idea that actually will take you past all those things in the day [you're] in. So, I think it's a show that wants to pose those big questions without getting into full magic. Because if they stay in their lives, hopefully altered in some tangible way that they can actually do something with them, that's not full magic, you know?

More Than Soup for the Soul

I'm 42. I don't know if exercising is really going to make much impact on my vibe. I'm just big hair and sunglasses. It's not [like] I'm running marathons or something, I'm doing low-level calisthenics. [But] not doing that for a solid week, it makes my body feel rickety. And if I just stand up and do these stretches and a little fucking jog or whatever, I'm going to have a better night's sleep and wake up the next day and be like, "Guess whose pants fit?"

I think that the condition of one's soul is not dissimilar. The less I treat that thing and the more I say, "Do I even exist?" . . . [If I'm like,] "Well, fuck it, I'm not participating at all, fuck this whole thing they call life," I still have to be alive and have an experience that is increasingly disconnected and dejected and nihilistic. And I might feel really cool doing it – like, "Boy, is this a tough aesthetic" – but ultimately, in my experience, somewhat sadder and [more] lonely for it. At the age I am, I don't find that aesthetic to be quite so hip as I used to anymore.

Evidence There's a Metaverse

Maybe I come at all of this from more of a spiritual level. In my experience, if I'm in a really shady mood, I come out of the house, I'm in a rush, and I go to hail a taxi, and it's raining, and there's no taxis there; and now I'm walking in the middle of the street, turned backwards to traffic, just looking for taxis, and I'm getting poured on; and I pull out my phone, and I try to click on Uber, but the account just doesn't work; I ordered the car, but it didn't even come, and so now I'm on my way to the subway; but there's fucking yellow tape there for some reason, that [entrance] is closed, [so I have to] walk three blocks over here. Now, I may as well just walk the full distance. I don't know what happened, but it's officially a shitty fucking day. Another day, I just

PHOTOGRAPH BY HEATHER HAZZAN

Probably wise to show up with some empathy in a life, even if life has no meaning. Even if none of this is anything, we've still got to go through it.

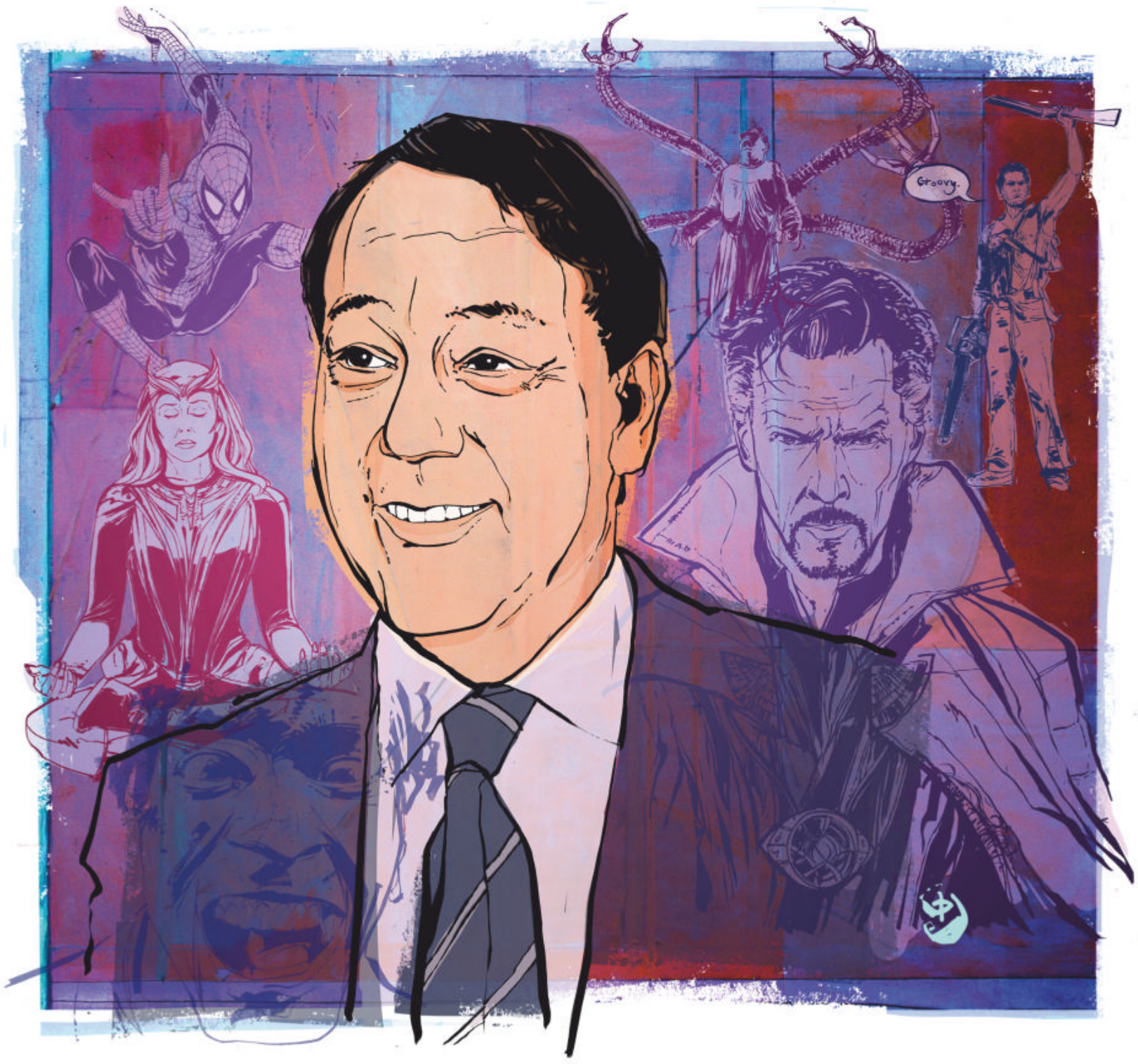
walk outside. Everything's there, I'm making the deli guy laugh while I'm ordering my coffee. I walk out the deli, boom, there's a taxi. I actually get [to where I'm going] a little bit early, and something funny happens outside the building right before I walk in. I don't know what that is, but I do think that it's curious. It seems like at any moment there's multiple universes you can tap into and that's going to shift how your day goes.

String Theory Explained, Sort Of

It's possible that we're just not seeing things correctly, and that our entire sense of the history of the universe is incorrect. I think that [string theory] really is, essentially, opening up a possibility that the world as we know it is not quite so limited. From there, it becomes a question of what we can do with all that information, what it's going to mean for the future of existence as we know it. There's a lot of questions now about building quantum computers and stuff, which would be a measure of fallout. I mean, I'm ultimately the wrong person to be asking about these things. You'd be better off asking scientists.

On Where We Go When We Die

I'm some schnook from the block or whatever, but I'm collaborating with people who can really wrap themselves around these concepts more tangibly. Do you have to fucking sit with some angel of death and play chess? Is it [like] Albert Brooks [in *Defending Your Life*] and you're going to be looking down at your fucking mistakes? Do you have to run into your fucking parents in the afterlife? I am genuinely spooked by a lot of these concepts, so I'm just curious to go swimming around in them and see what's what.



SUPERHEROES INC.

Sam Raimi Conquers Marvel's Multiverse

The director who helped turn superhero movies into pop mythmaking returns – and he's ready to start his second act

By BRIAN HIATT

FOR SAM RAIMI, the final weeks of making his first superhero movie since he helped kick-start the genre's modern era with his *Spider-Man* trilogy in the 2000s are pure multitasking madness. From his home in Los Angeles, the director is working on *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* in three places at once, virtually watching over composer Danny Elfman laying down a score with an orchestra at Abbey Road Studios in London, while also listening in on actors rerecording dialogue, and supervising the movie's sound mix. It all fits with a process that also had screenwriter Michael Waldron (who brought a deft comic touch to the Disney+ show *Loki*) finishing the screenplay while Raimi was in the process of shooting the movie. He'd taken over the project after Scott Derrickson, who directed the first *Doctor Strange*, in 2016, exited the sequel, citing "creative differences"; with a script to redo and a shooting deadline already in place, Raimi was behind schedule before he'd even started.

But Raimi seems to relish the chaotic creation of this latest Doctor Strange movie, which hits theaters May 6. After all, he made the gonzo indie horror classic *The Evil Dead* at age 20 for a mere $350,000, inventing camera techniques and pioneering new levels of homemade makeup grotesqueries as he went. *Multiverse* is essentially a direct sequel to three different Marvel properties: the original *Doctor Strange,* last year's *Spider-Man: No Way Home,* and the Disney+ TV show *WandaVision,* with Elizabeth Olsen's Wanda Maximoff on board as the film's second lead character. "It's a really complex movie," says Raimi, who used reshoots earlier in 2022 in part to clarify the story. "It's probably the most complex movie I've ever had anything to do with. Not just dealing with one character, or even five characters, but multiversal versions of those characters – and each one has a storyline."

In an age when "visionary director" has become a marketing cliché, Raimi is the real thing, his camera a living, even violent presence in his films. Career high points range from his absurdist horror masterpiece *Evil Dead 2* (1987) and the comic-book-movie-without-the-comic-book *Darkman* (1990) to the masterful, noirish drama *A Simple Plan* (1998). And, of course, the aforementioned *Spider-Man* movies, which helped pave the way for Marvel's current multiplex domination. Raimi hadn't made a movie since 2013, but at age 62, he's ready for a whole new chapter – and as he reveals, maybe even another Spider-Man film. "I'm hoping to find my next project very quickly," he says, "and keep it on the floor, as they say. I feel invigorated by this movie."

How are you feeling at this point in the process?

I feel very good. When we started, we had a deadline to start shooting with a script that I didn't really have anything to do with. And [screenwriter] Michael Waldron, [producer] Richie Palmer, the team at Marvel, and myself pretty much had to jump in and start over. I was very rushed and panicked – a lot of trepidation. But we kept working through it. And for us, the Covid delays were a blessing because it bought us more time to work on the script. We eventually got to the point where we had started shooting, even though we were still working on the script, and it went really well. Now I feel much more relieved. That part of the process is behind us.

***WandaVision* was supposed to come after this movie, which shifted some of the story and continuity. How did those changes work?**

I'm not really sure what the *WandaVision* schedule was or how it changed. I just know that halfway or maybe three-quarters of the way into our writing process, I'd first heard of this show they were doing and that we would have to follow it. Therefore, we had to really study what *WandaVision* was doing, so we could have a proper through line and character-growth dynamic. I never even saw all of *WandaVision*; I've just seen key moments of some episodes that I was told directly impact our storyline.

There's always a larger plan at work in the MCU. How much creative freedom did you have here?

Well, let me say – and this may sound like I'm talking out of both sides of my mouth – that Marvel allowed me complete creative freedom. However, it had to follow so many things

ILLUSTRATION BY **PJ Loughran**

in Marvel lore, that even though I had complete freedom, the previous movies and where Marvel wants to go in the future really directed the path in an incredibly specific way. Within those parameters I have freedom, but I've got to tell the story of those characters in a way that ties in with all of the properties simultaneously. We had to make sure, for instance, that Doctor Strange didn't know more than he had learned about the multiverse from *No Way Home*. And yet we had to make sure he wasn't ignorant of things that he had already learned. So everything was dictated by what had become before.

Spider-Man: No Way Home was also originally supposed to be after this movie, right?

Yes, it was all on the fly. "Now this is happening. Now that's happening." It was a fun juggling game. I guess it must be like that for the directors and writers of these very big Marvel properties that now have a long history. It was a very chaotic, wonderful, creative – I don't want to use this word "mess," because that's unfair – but it was just a cascade of ideas. We'd take the best ones and quickly weave together the fabric of this universe. It was very exciting, actually.

Do you feel like audiences have a certain desensitization to this type of fantastic spectacle now — that you have to keep upping the ante?

I think that's been true for every filmmaker in every decade. When *King Kong* came out [in 1933], a lot of filmmakers must've had heart attacks. I mean, I'd watch a movie like *E.T.* when it first came out and think, "Oh, my God, what am I doing in this business? I'll never make a movie that brilliant." But as filmmakers, we're also inspired. As much as it is a terrifying prospect to see something like that, it also sends a message that it's possible. And I think filmmakers turn to new technologies, new ideas. There's always ways to up the game.

Still, from the very first shot of _Evil Dead,_ you could tell that there was something unique. No one moves the camera like you. Where did that come from?

It came from limitations and trying to solve them. With *Evil Dead,* we couldn't build the monster – so we had to just use its point of view. And we tried to add as much strangeness to that point of view as possible, because the audience would use whatever was given them there to build their own monster in their head. So we put a big, wide lens on the camera to make it distorted around the edges. We put it on a stick that we could raise up and lower down over objects

COMIC (BOOK) RELIEF
Above: Raimi (right) on the set of *Spider-Man 2* with former Marvel Studios CEO Avi Arad (left) and Tobey Maguire in 2004. Left: Raimi calling the shots on *Darkman* in 1990. Below: Raimi directing Benedict Cumberbatch in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* in 2021.

– it was literally flying. Other times I would tape it to my hand and wave my arm up and down as I was running, trying to keep it as smooth and eerie as possible. I guess we learned our most important filmmaking lesson, which is the audience can always create something in their mind more effectively than we can show them. We just have to provide the right tools for them to build that monster.

You've said you had concerns about taking this movie on, because of your _Spider-Man 3_ experience and some of the negative reactions to that film.

Yeah, because these characters are so beloved, and you've got to tread very carefully. I have a sense of the absurd that maybe people don't want to see applied to their most-beloved superheroes. You've got to step gingerly when working with iconic characters. So, for a time I thought, maybe it's best that I don't mix with these much-beloved characters. I don't want to be untrue to them or myself.

And then I got a call from my agent, saying, "There's an opening on *Doctor Strange 2,* are you interested?" I just said, "What the hell? Yeah, let's make it." I love Doctor Strange. The first movie was great, very original. I was intrigued with Benedict Cumberbatch, and I realized, "Oh, Kevin Feige is now the head of Marvel?" So I would work for a boss that I respected. All those things had a big hand in it.

Kevin Feige worked on your _Spider-Man_ movies. What do you remember of him back then?

He was a hardworking young man who was working closely with Avi Arad, who was the head of Marvel. Kevin was always there doing work behind the scenes and on set. Thank goodness I was nice to the kid!

Did you see this _Doctor Strange_ movie as a sort of redemption after _Spider-Man 3_? There are many enjoyable things about that movie, by the way, though you've said some awful things about it.

I know. It was a very painful experience for me. I wanted to make a Spider-Man movie to redeem myself for that. [The aborted] *Spider-Man 4* – that was really what that was about. I wanted to go out on a high note. I didn't want to just make another one that pretty much worked. I had a really high standard in my mind. And I didn't think I could get that script to the level that I was hoping for by that start date.

So, then, what's this movie about for you?

This one's really more about having enjoyed the Marvel movies quite a bit and wondering, "Do I still have what it takes to be able to make those?" And it's like, "Yes, I do have it in me. I'm going to show those kids how to make a superhero picture." [*Laughs.*] I'm joking. I remember how hard it was – it's like a marathon. But it did have something to do with it.

What do you miss most from the Spider-Man movie that you never made?

I miss the really great cameo we had designed for Bruce Campbell.

The rumor was that he was supposed to play Mysterio.

That was one of the possibilities. We had other things in mind, too, but that was one of them. And I missed Kraven the Hunter. We were going to work that character into the next *Spider-Man*; I always wanted to see Kraven fight Spider-Man on the big screen. I thought that would be really unique. He's the ultimate hunter, and Spider-Man is like the most agile trickster of the skies. And I wanted to see Peter continue forward as a human being.

From the stuff that was beloved to the stuff that was not so beloved — what lessons did you take from that _Spider-Man_ trilogy when you went into _Multiverse of Madness_?

Oh, that's a good question. I guess the lesson would be: Really follow what you believe in. I think if I had done that a little bit more in the end, then [*Spider-Man 3*] would've been a little better.

Can one do that in the context of Hollywood? Is that possible?

Yes. But sometimes it gets very difficult. By the time that *Spider-Man 3* was in preproduction, I think Sony was aware that "Wait a minute, this is an asset of ours now. This is a big income-generating thing. This can't go unsupervised. This needs to be controlled." I think that had something to do with it.

Tobey Maguire's Spider-Man is back as part of the Marvel multiverse thanks to _No Way Home_. So would you be open to making some version of a Spider-Man movie again, after all this time?

If there was a great story there, I think it'd be . . . my love for the characters hasn't diminished one iota. It would be the same things that would stop me now that stopped me then: "Does Tobey want to do it? Is there an emotional arc for him? Is there a great

FROM TOP: EVERETT COLLECTION, 2; MATT KENNEDY/MARVEL STUDIOS

SAM RAIMI

conflict for this character? And is there a worthy villain that fits into the theme of the piece?" There's a lot of questions that would have to be answered. If those could be answered, then I'd love to.

Part of what made your *Spider-Man* movies work is that they really were Peter Parker's story — and the simplicity, humanity, and sweetness of the love story, which wasn't necessarily what people expected from you.

That was something that I always found so appealing in Stan Lee's *Spider-Man* comic books: that Peter Parker had a love story going on. And in fact, there were two different women that he was interested in over the course of his series. But I remember as a kid thinking "I got to get the next *Spider-Man* comic book, because I'm really into the romance of it." Not that I would tell the other boys at school, because I was embarrassed.

I'm not sure everyone realizes that you and Stan Lee went around trying to get a Thor movie made way back in the early 1990s. What were those experiences like?

They were great. We worked on a story based on his Thor stories, then we took it around to pitch to the different studios – and I couldn't believe that they didn't regard [Lee] more highly back then. This was probably 1991 or something, and he was treated like just another writer. "Oh, great. You write comic books. Big deal." I remember going to eight different studios, and then looking at eight different rejection slips, saying "How could they say no to this?" They'd say things like, "People are kind of touchy about their gods," and I'd go, "Yes, but it's not like a religious picture. He's the God of Thunder!" They so didn't get it.

It was around that time that you'd said you were worried about being too associated with genre material, and then you made several movies, like *A Simple Plan,* that were far less genre-driven. In your mind, did you think you were moving beyond the types of movies you'd made earlier in your career forever?

I mean, if I said I thought a certain type of genre was trapping me, I didn't mean to say that. I've always looked at genre films as the place where I can get another job when things go bad. I can keep telling stories there. But I do remember after *Army of Darkness* came out, a reporter saying to me, "Is this going to be your last movie, because you seem to be just doing all the same old tricks." I just went, "Oh, my God, really?"

And so, it was after that I thought, "I don't want to be doing the same old tricks. I want to be trying to do new things." I tried to branch out, doing different things that I hadn't done before – like a Western [1995's *The Quick and the Dead*], or a crime thriller, or other things that just hadn't occurred to me to do. That's really why I made those films in the Nineties, from all those different genres. I was trying to stretch and learn and grow as a storyteller.

It did seem like you were trying a number of different techniques for that run of four movies [from *The Quick and the Dead* to 2000's *The Gift*] a lot of times.

That's exactly right. I thought, "I'm not going to rely on the camera to be flashy or splashy. I'm going to make the audience invest in these characters. I've got to learn more about how to

tell a story not just through the lens, but through people." And I learned a lot of that from working with great actors: Billy Bob Thornton, Bill Paxton, Bridget Fonda, Cate Blanchett, Kevin Costner, Gene Hackman.

By the time I applied for the job on the first *Spider-Man,* I finally had 10 years of experience working like that – and thank goodness, because those *Spider-Man* movies and *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* took everything I knew about filmmaking, from directing actors to knowing visual effects. It taxed every field of learning that I have had the wonderful opportunity to experience in this industry.

So what, overall, was the hardest part of making this new movie?

I think the hardest part was the time deadlines, not having the story or the script . . . not knowing what the ending was halfway into it. Michael's trying to stay a couple days ahead of us with the next page coming out of his computer printer, and it's hard because you want to make sure that everything is supporting the whole, that the themes are running through the picture. But when you don't quite know everything about the picture, it's hard to do that job as effectively as possible.

Let's say there's a character from another universe — say,the Marvel movies that Fox did — who suddenly shows up in the movie, if indeed that's true. That's very exciting for the audience, but it feels like that excitement of recognition could push you out of the story. How do you balance that?

I think if that situation appears, sometimes the best answer is to just let the character who's experiencing this new character react truthfully. Now, if there was a famous character from another universe that appeared in *Multiverse of Madness,* I'm not sure that our Doctor Strange would even know who he was; he might blow him off and not make it any big deal at all. I think a truthful response can sometimes be the funniest or the most engaging for an audience. You put them in a position like, "Man, you don't know who *that guy* is? Oh, my God!" It's like if some schmo was meeting James Bond onscreen for the first time, and said, "Buddy, you'll have the martini the way I serve it. Get me?" "Don't you know that's James Bond?!" That's a different kind of fun for the audience to have.

You bounced from *Spider-Man 3* into *Drag Me to Hell* [a highly underrated 2009 horror movie], and then there was *Oz the Great and Powerful* [a riff on L. Frank Baum's *Oz* characters]. That was in 2013 — and this is your first film since then. Were you planning to retire at that point?

No, I just couldn't find a script that I really loved. I didn't feel passionately about something enough to direct it as a feature film. It was a long time, and it was unpleasant. I really do love directing. It's all I really know how to do.

When did you realize you wanted to become a filmmaker professionally?

I think it was when I was in 10th grade and met Bruce Campbell and these four guys that were all making these Super 8 movies. And it was like, "Oh, my gosh, these guys get together every weekend. They've got partners. Somebody can film. Somebody can throw the pie. Somebody can take the pie in the face. This is everything we need." One kid had costumes, like two suit jackets from a garage sale. Another kid had a tripod, and I thought, "It's possible. I can join up with these guys, and they have similar interests." That really was a giant advantage for me to find somebody else after making movies for three years on my own from the age of, like, 12. Suddenly I actually could take it on as something that I wanted to do for the rest of my life. It seemed possible at that point.

Before you ever made a directly comic-book-influenced movie, to what extent did comic books influence the way that you approach filmmaking?

They were always a tremendous influence on me, especially all the great artists from Marvel comic books or the DC comic books. I read them as a kid constantly. And when it came time to design shots for the movies that I was making, I naturally went to the only illustration story system that I was aware of, which were comic books.

When you're directing a gigantic movie like *Multiverse* again, are you still working from a certain muscle memory that you built up from when you were making movies for fun?

Not as much as I should be. Because that's what I should be doing with every shot and every moment, thinking "What's the best technique?" Not simply "We've got to make the schedule, put it on a crane. I know it can work from there. It may not be the absolute best choice, but we've got to keep momentum going for this unit, because I've got to get off this stage by five o'clock today, and they're going to tear it down."

You suffered a terrible loss in your family when you were young. How did losing your older brother affect you?

That was my brother Sander, and he was a great inspiration to me. He's the one that first showed me *Spider-Man* comic books. And he was a magician on the side. I remember he would perform at kids' parties. And I learned a lot of my desire to perform from him. So he had a tremendous influence on me. He passed away when he was only 16 years old. I was 10 at the time. So I didn't get to know him as well as I wish I could have. But he was a super-positive role model for me.

And I feel like in his absence, I pushed more into the field of magic to try and provide for my parents what they had lost in him. And that love of magic was very similar to my love of filmmaking. When I started to move out of magic, I moved into filmmaking, another way to manipulate time and space and entertain the audience and mystify them and throw them. So I think I got a lot of my love of filmmaking indirectly from my brother Sander.

You were also pretty skilled as a stage illusionist, right?

I would perform at county fairs – not even state fairs, *county fairs* – and kids' parties, where it's like 23 of these little monsters in front of me. I would perform a magician's repertoire of illusions, and I'd make balloon animals, and try as hard as I could to get out of there before the last balloon animal was given out, because by then the first kid pops their balloon and they want another one. You can end up getting caught at a kid's party, making balloon animals for like two hours if you don't do it efficiently and quickly, then pack up and get out.

Is there a metaphor in there somewhere?

[*Laughs*] I don't know. I don't know. You'll have to find it. ®

[TAYLOR HAWKINS, 1972-2022]

The Heartbeat of the Foos

He was one of the 21st century's most beloved drummers and a flag bearer for the spirit of rock & roll. Then it all ended, way too soon

By BRIAN HIATT

In the mid-eighties, when Taylor Hawkins was a teenager in Laguna Beach, California, he'd drum along to his favorite records in his parents' garage so loudly that local kids got used to hearing him during soccer practice on a nearby field. Hawkins played some baseball, at the urging of a brother who "willed him" to be good at it, and surfed a bit, though not as much as his central-casting California-dude looks and lifelong fondness for going around shirtless and barefoot in board shorts would suggest. "I was never that great," he said. "Because I was always in the garage, smoking cigarettes and playing drums." He played in his high school's jazz band for a while, until they threw him out for being "too loud, too fast."

So it all came back to that garage and those records, an obsession that began when he saw a Queen concert at age 10. "My rudimental training was Rush's *Exit…Stage Left* and the Police's *Zenyattà Mondatta,*" he once told *Modern Drummer*. In upscale Laguna Beach, the preppy kids were into reggae, so Hawkins would keep his unfashionable Van Halen and Queen records to himself. He never got much into punk rock, either. "I went to a hardcore show in Huntington when I was 12 or 13 and hated it," he said. "It was just really rough, and there were no girls there."

Hawkins was a true believer in the power and glory of arena rock who eventually got to see his day-to-day life become indistinguishable from rock & roll fantasy camp. After high school, he went from playing in a Jane's Addiction-influenced local band while working in a music store to touring big venues with the singer Sass Jordan. For Jordan, it was as much about Hawkins' obvious star power and charisma as his chops, and she left it to her musical director, Stevie Salas, to forcefully instill some of the fundamentals Hawkins missed in his self-tutelage, an experience he'd compare to the movie *Whiplash*.

From there, Alanis Morissette snatched him up for her band just as her early fame was exploding, only for Dave Grohl to grab him for Foo Fighters in 1997. With the Foos, he'd eventually get to headline stadiums and play with just about all of his heroes, from Rush's Geddy Lee and Alex Lifeson to Led Zeppelin's John Paul Jones to Paul McCartney. With his flamboyance and musical power, he was one of the last rock drummers to achieve stardom in his own right, taking over vocals for a song each night at Foos concerts and fronting various side projects.

Like too many rock & roll heroes, Hawkins died on tour, in a hotel room, in a city far from home. The Foo Fighters were supposed to play a concert that night, March 25, in Bogota, Colombia. He was 50 years old, and left behind his wife of 17 years, Alison, and three kids, Oliver, Annabelle, and Everleigh. At press time, his death was a mystery, though local authorities said various substances, including opioids, had been found in his urine, and that his heart was enlarged – a fact that Hawkins told Rolling Stone last year that his doctor had noticed, but thought was harmless.

The dark side of rock stardom revealed itself early to Hawkins via what he called "my big fucking fuckup" – when he overdosed in London in 2001, leaving him in a coma for two weeks. Grohl, who founded Foo Fighters after losing Kurt Cobain to suicide just seven years earlier, stood watch by Hawkins' bedside, and said later it was the one time he thought about ending the band.

Hawkins acknowledged smoking weed after the incident, but otherwise seemed to embrace some version of sobriety, throwing his energy into mountain biking. "I've been on a reckless path for a while," he said a year after the overdose. "One thing I've realized is I do not want to become some fucking rock & roll cliché, selling his drums when his career's over to buy drugs. My dad always says it takes me a long time to learn my lessons, and it took me a while to work it out. My mom's an alcoholic, too, and I saw her beat herself up every day." Last year, he told Rolling Stone, "I'm just lucky that I did get the message at the right time."

He also told Rolling Stone that it was impossible to play Foo Fighters shows unless he was totally sober, while also acknowledging severe stage fright. "I'm in hell right now," he said in June 2021, on the day of the Foos' first real show since the pandemic started. The fact that it was a mere club warmup gig made no difference. Hawkins had been on the road for 28 years before Covid-19 hit, and he was surprised at how much he enjoyed the break from his anxieties and the chance to focus on his side projects, especially NHC, his band with Jane's Addiction's Dave Navarro and Chris Chaney: "I was feeling nice not doing anything. It's nice being a loser for a year and a half; it really was."

Grohl saw Hawkins as his "musical twin flame" and told Rolling Stone last year that from the moment he met him backstage at the KROQ Weenie Roast – Hawkins was still playing with Morissette – it was "love at first sight. I instantly knew, we're gonna know each other forever." When Hawkins initially had trouble playing in the studio, Grohl walked him through it, splitting drum duties on 1999's *There Is Nothing Left to Lose*. On the follow-up, 2002's *One by One,* Hawkins played on every song and was the band's sole drummer from that point on.

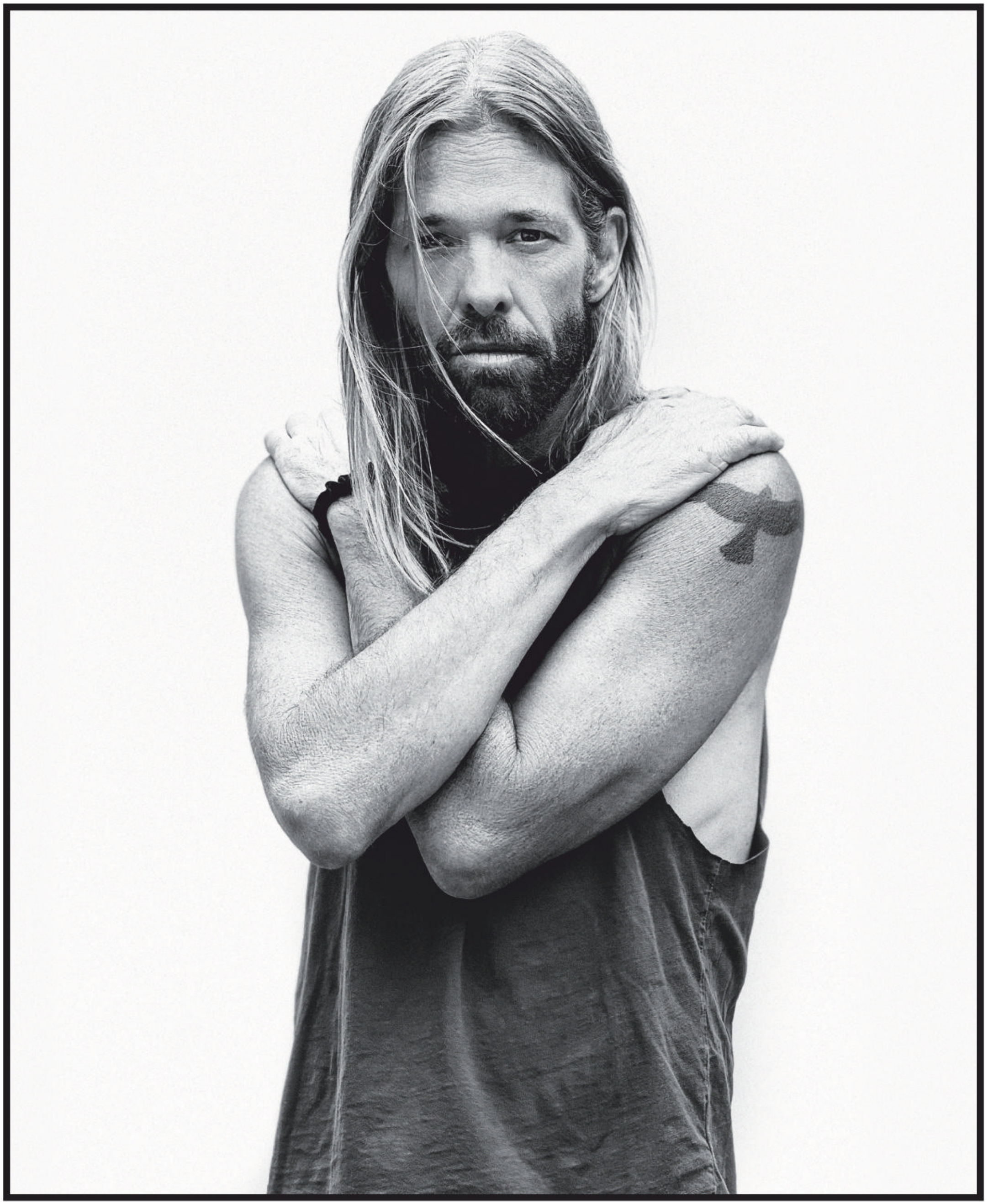
Hawkins was still daunted by the fact his band was fronted by one of rock's greatest drummers, who still picked up his sticks for their demos. At times, Hawkins admitted, he felt like "the douche little dumbshit behind him that just fucking does whatever I'm told, and tries to play 'Everlong' as good as him, and I can't." Just about everyone, even Axl Rose, would ask, "What's it like being Dave Grohl's drummer?" (He eventually came up with a good answer: "I'm rich.")

BEST OF YOU Hawkins in 2021. "He would be in this band if he was half the fucking drummer he was," Dave Grohl said of Hawkins. "Because of who he is."

"He would be in this band even if he was half the fucking drummer he was," Grohl said, "because of who he is.... I think that he really underestimates his importance in this band. Oh, my God, what would we be without Taylor Hawkins? Could you imagine? It would just be a completely different thing." Foo Fighters were supposed to tour until December, but they canceled every date in the wake of Hawkins' passing, and the future of the band – born out of tragedy in the first place – is unclear. Before Hawkins' death, at least, the Foos seemed to collectively imagine themselves continuing on for decades, à la the Rolling Stones. "Who knows what that's going to look like when we're all 60-plus, or older," guitarist Chris Shiflett mused in 2021.

When he was younger, Hawkins may have had a different vision of his future, musing on it in 2002. "When I'm 50," he said, "when all this nonsense is over, I want to go live in Hawaii with my family, go surfing, smoke a little pot."

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Jason Nocito**



Q & A

Becky G

The 'reverse crossover' star on empowering women, singing at the Oscars, and working with another 'G'

By JULYSSA LOPEZ

BECKY G is only 25, but she's already lived a few different lives in the music industry. After starting out as a precocious teen star, she morphed into a full-blown Latin music sensation – "a reverse crossover," as she calls it. In between, she's faced major difficulties, including a complicated lawsuit and a highly public breakup, yet still found a way to keep thriving. "I feel like the test dummy that's been in I don't know how many vehicles to make the best one," she says, laughing. "I'm just like, 'I've got a broken arm on this side, I've got one eyeball falling out on the other side, but I'm here, and I'm only going to get stronger.' " Her upcoming album, *Esquemas,* is a testament to that. It's Becky at her most confident and playful, exploring disco pop, electronic production, even touches of doo-wop. "By no means do I have it all figured out," she says, "but I know I'm the closest I've ever been because I'm absolutely terrified. But if you're not peeing your pants and something isn't pushing you to grow, it's probably not right for you."

You've always made it a priority to collaborate with other women, and recently you were on "Pa Mis Muchachas" with Christina Aguilera, Nathy Peluso, and Nicki Nicole. Talk to me about empowering women through these songs.
It's funny because it started with "Sin Pijama" [a collaboration with Natti Natasha]. That was me challenging my own label. Everyone kept saying, "Well, if you think it's such a hit, why would you want to share it?" I told them, "Hit songs happen every day. I want to make history." And we did. We're a force to reckon with now in the music industry. The way I walk into a room, when I see my female counterparts, it's different. Instead of trying to make headlines about who is fighting about what, it's about our record-breaking numbers.

You guys *have* made it about making history — one example of that is "Mamiii," with Karol G, which is all over the charts.
I remember being at a Latin awards show many years ago, and someone asked me, "So, how do you feel now that there's another 'G' here?" You have two females, two Latinas, Karol G and Becky G. It was like, "Was that intentional? Who stole whose name?" – and all this talk that was just so unnecessary. So, I've been really excited about the idea of us doing something together for years now. I had been working on this song with [reggaeton producer] Ovy on the Drums, and I could hear that I could put some Mexican influence in there. That's why I put the *gritos* in there. Ovy loved it so much that when he was working with Karol on her album, he played her the song. I had a missed call from Karol. She's like, "I love your song, and I want to get on it." In my head, I was just like, "Oh, my God, this is the moment I've been waiting for."

You've talked about being intentional about sharing parts of yourself. How do you balance that with how much people want to know?
I always try to do things with intention, even lyrics. I like to talk with my fans sometimes on social media, and I asked them what they were doing on Instagram. A girl responded, "I'm singing 'Mamiii' at the top of my lungs, like I'm hurt, but I'm in a happy, healthy relationship." And I said, "Oh, my God. That's so me." People forget because they see [me in] a healthy relationship now, but it doesn't mean I haven't experienced pain.

Having grown up on social media, so exposed, messed me up to the point where I struggle sometimes sharing now, knowing I'll be judged. I've seen things where it was like, "No one asked for Becky G's presence here." And I'm like, "Well, damn, that's how you feel? OK." I'm continuing to do the work to process how these things make me feel and to protect my heart. I'm more thankful for the connections than I am upset about the negativity.

It sounds like you've done a lot of growing.
I've always wanted to be this, excuse my language, but an "I don't give a fuck" kind of person. But I just don't have it in me. I give a fuck so much [*laughs*]. I care so much about everything that I do, everyone that I love. I really want to lean into that, especially with this new project. It's fun for me to showcase the different sides of me, so it's like, "Becky can be this cute, sweet little bubbly person, but she can also be sexy as hell. She can also be vulnerable as hell. She can sing a doo-wop record the same way she can sing a trap record, the same way she can sing a disco, roller-skating record."

You got asked to be a part of the "We Don't Talk About Bruno" performance at the Oscars, another big moment for Latin music.
There's this little girl in me that grew up in L.A. knowing that Inglewood wasn't so far away from Hollywood, but it felt so far away. And to be at one of the biggest nights in Hollywood with incredible talent and a lot of specifically Latinx representation, it made me so proud. There was a moment backstage, where I told the cast, "I'm so thankful that I get to do this with you guys. Thank you for welcoming me with open arms, to be a part of this presentation, and let's kill it. It's not every day you get to perform at the Oscars."

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Wrestler, Rapper, Right-Wing Troll

Online, you can become a star by rapping conservative talking points, even if you probably don't believe in them

By ALICE HINES

PERHAPS YOU'VE seen the music video for "Whiteboy," which currently has more than 22 million views on YouTube and made a minor celebrity of a carpenter turned pro wrestler turned rapper named Tom MacDonald.

It's set in a Southern California classroom where the musician, who is white, wears blond box braids and sits at a desk in a row of bored-looking students. Just as he starts rapping about how he shouldn't have to feel bad for being white, the students start to make faces and throw paper at him. The teacher, played by a Black actor, tries to quiet MacDonald down, waving his arms and wordlessly shouting. The rest of the classroom begins to taunt him: "White boy, don't say that/White boy, you so bad." MacDonald overpowers them with a scream of anguish, his voice rising above all the others in the room: "White boy, white noise, saying shit I can't say with my white voice." Naturally, there are viral videos mocking the song. "Cringing With Whiteboy," a reaction video, is currently sitting around 1.6 million views. Almost as if it were an HBO Max original, MacDonald released an accompanying behind-the-scenes clip where he describes the concept of the song. He says that he wanted viewers to get pissed off. Those reactions, he hoped, would "spark the conversation."

But MacDonald started something more vicious than a conversation. Even if you've never seen the video for "Whiteboy," you know precisely the type of person who would put it on repeat. He'd gifted the culture war a new text. Eventually, white nationalists discovered the song. MacDonald said he spent hours deleting their comments celebrating him. "That freaked me the fuck out," he said, claiming that, as a Canadian, he was unaware of the chaos his track would unleash. Of course, he brought this upon himself.

Four years after "Whiteboy," MacDonald is eager to "show people I'm not just some brainwashed right-wing zombie." When we spend time together this winter at his place, he's ultra-paranoid about Covid, requiring us to stay masked and socially distanced even outdoors. He suggests that he isn't against abortion, or gun control, that he watches videos about "intersectionality." All of which throws me off. MacDonald's music since "Whiteboy" has been a steady stream of ever-more-viral tracks trashing Black Lives Matter, fat acceptance, and whatever other liberal boogeyman was on Fox News that week. Although he also makes pop punk about breakups and moody tracks about sobriety, those never seem to blow up the same way. He acknowledges extreme positions benefit him. "I think a lot of people benefit from social unrest and civil conflict," he tells me matter-of-factly.

"It's the social media platforms. It's the newspapers, it's the magazines. It's Fox News and CNN and whoever the fuck else – ROLLING STONE." It's also Tom MacDonald, he concedes. "But like my whole thing is, like, be aware."

"Be aware" sounds a lot like "stay woke." But don't be fooled. In all of MacDonald's body of work, his favorite target is wokeness.

Conversations about free speech and cancel culture have created a cottage industry for public figures willing to use language that many people might find offensive. At the highest valuations, celebrities like Joe Rogan have been able to build some of the most popular individual brands in America – in Rogan's case, amid calls for him to be deplatformed for everything from vaccine misinformation to a number of since-deleted episodes in which the host routinely says the n-word.

MacDonald is likely the most famous artist in a budding genre of his own creation: right-wing protest rap. On YouTube, songs with titles like "Snowflakes" (by MacDonald), "Rittenhouse" (by Tyson James, a "politically incorrect Christian"), and "Patriot" (by Topher, featuring the "Marine Rapper") regularly go viral and even reach the charts, to the confusion or ignorance of industry players. One of MacDonald's latest projects is a joint album with "hick-hop" rapper Adam Calhoun, released in February. Calhoun hails from Illinois and has a laconic flow and crude lyrics; he is to One America News Network what MacDonald is to Fox News. In his 2018 track "Racism," he juxtaposes stereotypes among various kinds of white and Black Americans, using the n-word with impunity. Incredibly, the song remains on YouTube, where it's been viewed 16 million times.

"It's not something I would have said," MacDonald says of the n-word when I ask about working with someone like Calhoun. "But at the same time, I don't think that automatically just makes you, like, a Nazi."

MacDonald, on the other hand, has so far avoided being meaningfully deplatformed. Perhaps because, since "Whiteboy," his tracks have carefully danced around aligning with any particular point of view. Instead, they point out the supposed hypocrisy of others. In 2020, one of MacDonald's tracks, "People So Stupid," briefly bumped "W.A.P." off iTunes' top hip-hop spot. His Spotify and TikTok pages boast millions of plays, and his music errs on the side of internet-bred edgelord rather than overt far-right politics. If anything, he represents a new kind of online right, interested in liberal totems like rap culture.

ALICE HINES *is a writer in New York and a Vice News correspondent.*

CALLING ALL SNOWFLAKES
MacDonald in his Southern California backyard

NOVA ROCKAFELLER

I tracked down the actor who played the teacher in the "Whiteboy" video, Adam Pepper. "I got so much backlash for that, trust me," said Pepper. "But you gotta understand. I'm just an actor, and that's my craft." At one point in the video, when the classroom is on the verge of a riot, Pepper breaks down in tears – a moment that wasn't scripted. It was difficult listening to MacDonald talk about how he felt discrimination for his "pretty blue eyes." "As a Black man, with racism and the way police target us," said Pepper, "you're like, 'What in the world? How could he say that?' "

At the same time, Pepper is adamant that MacDonald himself isn't racist. In fact, he respects him as an "out-of-the-box artist." Pepper has appeared in two more videos since and doesn't think MacDonald believes much of what's in his songs: "He says it because he knows it's going to get some type of reaction."

MacDonald has critics on the right who don't entirely trust that he's one of them. Michael Knowles, a conservative commentator for the Daily Wire, took issue, in particular, with the fact that MacDonald cast a trans woman, Blaire White, in the role of a sexy video girl in his music video for "Snowflakes."

White is a YouTuber whose own channel also attracts millions of views for conservative takes on gender issues. In "Snowflakes," White mouths along to lyrics like this: "He, she, his, him, hers, them, they/Screw a pronoun, 'cause everyone's a retard these days."

One user on Twitter posted that it made them sad to see White used as a prop in a song that implied she was a man. White, for her part, saw the appearance as iconic. "I was the first trans woman in a rap video," White claims when I reach her on the phone. She later clarifies she means openly trans – a claim that, at least in mainstream hip-hop, is surprisingly difficult to verify – "and even more interesting that it was a right-winger that made the video." To White, the fact that MacDonald is blowing up is an indication that artists like her can win even on platforms like YouTube, which she believes censor conservatives.

What worries critics about MacDonald's brand of creator is how it offers cover to people with straightforwardly dangerous ideas around white supremacy and other forms of bigotry. Sure, MacDonald has never put a Confederate flag in a music video, but he's not afraid to collaborate with artists who do, and, presumably, reap the benefits of their audience. It's Trumpian, in a way: having so many incoherent opinions at once that you never have to be held accountable for their implications.

YouTube didn't reply to requests for comment. Specifically, we wanted to know why it hasn't taken down or demonetized videos like "Racism." The company bans hate speech but has a different policy for borderline content, e.g., videos "containing inflammatory religious or supremacist content without a direct call to violence or a primary purpose of inciting hatred," as its policy chief put it in a 2018 testimony to the Senate. She was addressing politicians concerned about the spread of extremism on the platform, and she reassured them: Borderline content, although not in violation of YouTube rules, would no longer be recommended by its algorithms. Comments, ads, and likes would also be removed.

After calling a journalist a slur, conservative commentator Steven Crowder was just one of many creators who saw his platform demonetized. So why aren't white rappers dropping n-bombs getting hit? Aram Sinnreich, a professor of communication at American University, thinks YouTube's policy is applied unevenly to music. "A hip-hop song isn't getting flagged, unless it's explicitly like 'I love Hitler,' " he says. "Music gets a pass because it's seen as a form of entertainment. We are justifiably very cautious about censoring art and limiting people's entertainment options."

I CREATED a blank-slate account with a burner email on YouTube to see what

the platform would recommend to me after MacDonald's tracks. The algorithm dredged up everyone from Machine Gun Kelly, Yelawolf, and Dr. Dre to songs by lesser-known artists who were much more extreme than anything MacDonald has ever made. Take "Rittenhouse," by James, which appears to call for the violent overthrow of the government: "Y'all about to make me pull a Rittenhouse/Bring the muscle, pull up at a politician house," he raps in the chorus while brandishing an assault weapon. The debut of the video featured an insurance ad.

"He fucked up somebody else's life. Championing him? That's fucked up to me," MacDonald said when I asked him about the video.

A generous interpretation would be that MacDonald is perhaps clumsily trying to find common ground. Take the track "If I Was Black" as an example. It was released as a mea culpa of sorts, one year after "Whiteboy." "If I was Black, I won't lie, I'd be scared to walk at night," MacDonald raps. "The whole neighborhood is trippin' like I'm out committin' crimes."

A less generous interpretation is that the track is "digital blackface," as Sinnreich puts it. In the video, MacDonald superimposes his voice onto Black faces and bodies, and vice versa. Meanwhile, he raps in a "blaccent" that "signifies Blackness in this kind of racially grotesque way," Sinnreich says, "that could only exist within the post-minstrel hothouse of American musical culture."

MacDonald called the digital blackface characterization ignorant. "The whole song was about unity and using your imagination to try to see the world through someone else's eyes," he says.

I asked Adam Pepper, who played one of the Black Panthers in "If I Was Black," what he thought. "I don't think Tom was doing blackface," he said. But he agreed with another of Sinnreich's points: "Tom's music flirts with neo-Nazi. It flirts with white power. I think sometimes he puts Black people in his videos to make it easier to digest."

MacDonald has carved a niche the music industry didn't think existed. Like an episode of *Tucker Carlson Tonight* sped up and set to a beat, his top-performing songs are an ice cream sundae of grievances: everything from #MeToo to body positivity to abortion to gay pride to white privilege. It's appealing to a new demographic. "You might not consider yourself someone who cares about a rap song that's climbing the charts," Fox News host Martha MacCallum said on her show recently. "But it's a pretty interesting culture moment when the tune is called 'Fake Woke.'" "Facts don't care 'bout feelings" goes the chorus, quoting a line by Ben Shapiro, a conservative pundit who famously claimed that rap "is not actually a form of music."

"It's human nature to listen to the negative," MacDonald tells me. "Pretty quickly, I sort of realized that the people who didn't like me were doing the most for me. They were the ones that were like, 'I have to show 30 of my friends this piece of shit, because I hate him.'"

And despite the concerns of his critics, he is part of a growing trend in music, as video-driven platforms like YouTube and TikTok become viable avenues to grow a fan base. MacDonald's numbers aren't astronomical in terms of major-label superstars, but they're competitive, especially considering that he has no PR team, label, or even manager. He produces the beats for his songs, and he makes music videos directed by his girlfriend on sets built in various places around their home.

And yet he has attained a level of celebrity – he has fans who decal their trucks with his face – that some artists with institutional backing never achieve. "As many people that hate [a song] with a fiery passion, there usually are others who love it with that same fiery passion," MacDonald says.

IT'S RAINING IN L.A., and my feet are soaked with drizzle. A few hours ago, a wind gust knocked out a stretch of the fence bordering MacDonald's backyard. And yet, here we are, outside and socially distanced for the past eight hours, and it's going to stay that way.

"Oh, my god. The fucking Republican rapper guy just told me to put a fucking mask on," MacDonald jokes. He's wearing a Balenciaga hat, a puffer coat, and a black KN95 mask that covers up piercings and face tats. The mask part wasn't a joke. I put it back on. His video director and girlfriend, Nova Rockafeller, cackles extravagantly, maybe nervously.

"He raps in a 'blaccent' that signifies Blackness in this racially grotesque way that could only exist within the post-minstrel hothouse of American musical culture."

When I meet MacDonald at his house in the L.A. suburbs, he's getting ready to shoot a new video, "Whiteboyz." Learning from the past, the track attempts to repeat his former viral success. But "we have to be careful. We don't want to attract the wrong kind of white boy," he says. He has the sort of crusty rock-star look that we've come to expect in pop culture. MacDonald's style is what you might describe as tactical Lisa Frank: flamingo-print shorts, bulletproof vest paired with rainbow cartoon-print leggings. Like a character out of *Spring Breakers*.

During our conversations, he'd often walk back a perspective that seemed obvious from one of his songs. For instance: "I never said that I was anti-abortion. I was just looking at it." The line in question: "Bacteria's life on Mars, but a heartbeat isn't life on Earth, like weird."

He admits that he sees systemic anti-Black racism as a real issue. When I ask MacDonald for examples of anti-white bias, he's pensive. White people are not necessarily victims, he says emphatically, seemingly walking back a core message of his songs. But the problem with calling them privileged is that it discounts "a whole group of white people who are, like, 'Well, what about me? My life's fucked up. The system held me down.'"

MacDonald grew up in Edmonton, Alberta, a city of a million inhabitants in central Canada where the average high in January is 20 degrees Fahrenheit. His dad was a contract negotiator for oil rigs. After high school, MacDonald worked in construction, specifically carpentry. When he wasn't building houses or on rigs, he performed in pro-wrestling matches on pay-per-view, wrestling against ex-WWF competitors and touring on Canada's professional circuit as All-Star Tom MacDonald.

His viral fame started with a song called "Dear Rappers," in 2017. It attacked so-called mumble rap, which he claimed focused on money, cars, and getting fucked up. According to MacDonald, commenters responded that he was racist for speaking condescendingly about rap culture as a white person. Thus, a cycle was born. His follow-ups to "Whiteboy" follow a predictable pattern: "Everybody Hates Me," "Straight White Male," "Politically Incorrect."

In pro wrestling, the good guys are known as babyfaces and the bad guys are known as heels. It's all scripted, and some observers have compared the us-versus-them mentality to American politics. "The role of a heel is to get 'heat,' which means spurring the crowd to obstreperous hatred, and generally involves cheating and pretty much any other manner of socially unacceptable behavior that will get the job done," writes Mike Edison in *The Baffler*, in an essay about pop culture's greatest heel of all: Donald Trump.

I ask MacDonald if he is playing a role. He's not performing, he replied. "I am a heel. That's my resting state." In one of his early matches, MacDonald put a metal garbage can over his opponent's head and beat it with a chair. He had a long-standing "feud," or scripted rivalry, with a friend. He was once hit in the face with a golf club that severed a slice of his ear. That match paid him just $40.

MacDonald monetizes new releases on his YouTube channel, and virality there fuels digital downloads and physical album sales. He has more than a million monthly streams on Spotify and says he sold 48,000 physical copies of his album with Adam Calhoun within the first week. He hired his mom, dad, and sister to pack and ship a warehouse worth of CDs at $15 apiece.

MacDonald's girlfriend and video director, Nova Rockafeller (born Paholek), grew up between Edmonton and Jamaica. She has a barbed-wire tattoo encircling her neck, and at one point performed at the Gathering of the Juggalos. (*LA Weekly* called her "violent but talented" in 2013 after she told them she'd punched 25 people in the face in her lifetime.) "I think of those crazy white boys," she says. "Like the 16-year-old kids, lighting fires by the river." We're in the backyard of their suburban house in L.A.'s San Fernando Valley, describing the kind of white boy they're hoping to speak to. "Like, what was that thing Zuckerberg was riding?" MacDonald asks, referring to the viral video of the Meta, f.k.a. Facebook, founder on a hydrofoil, holding an American flag.

If you were to absent-mindedly scroll through MacDonald's Instagram, you'd have a hard time figuring out he's been staying almost entirely inside for two years. MacDonald rarely posts masks on his social media accounts. When Rockafeller does, she avoids reading the comments. Their precautions aren't a secret, but they're

also not obvious. "New people showing up on a constant basis, 'Like, just saw fucking "Fake Woke"' and are like, 'Fuck the system,'" MacDonald says. "And you're like 'OK, well, whatever, welcome to the team.'"

Rockafeller's fear of dying from Covid is so acute that at first I think there's no way I'll ever be able to meet MacDonald in real life. She tells me she still wipes down all her groceries and holds her breath to check her mail on her suburban street.

She and Macdonald build elaborate sets in their garage, spare room, and backyard. One is a mental asylum, complete with padded walls and fluorescent lighting. Another is an apocalypse bunker. There's a *Mad Men*-esque living room with a bear rug and roaring fireplace. For one video, he bought a vintage car that's still in the front yard.

One evening while I'm in L.A., MacDonald hosts one of his weekly livestreams on Discord for a couple of hundred of his die-hard fans. A 15-year-old from Indiana is asking for relationship advice.

MacDonald has written dozens of songs about sobriety and mental health, and many of the fans on this livestream say they like these songs better than his more viral political tracks. At times, he seems to regret his trajectory. "I'm not just the white conservative rap guy," he tells me at one point. "I've also done a lot of stuff that's not politically charged, but that doesn't seem to get digested and championed the same way, for obvious reasons."

GROWING UP, MacDonald's favorite wrestler to watch was Stone Cold Steve Austin, whose shtick included guzzling beers and occasionally beating the shit out of his boss, the then-WWF chairman. But the anti-establishment wrestler also sometimes played the hero. MacDonald recalls a moment when, as a child and bullied at school, he saw a match between Austin and the Undertaker, pro wrestling's terrifying undead zombie. "Steve Austin came out, and he was like this little six-foot dude with a shaved head and, like, didn't have the pageantry," MacDonald recalls, unexpectedly starting to cry. "As a child that spoke to me. To see a person go up and fight in spite of the fact that they would probably lose." Steve Austin won that day. A few years later, he'd gut-punch – a.k.a. "stun" – Trump himself, during one of the future president's appearances promoting his show *The Apprentice*.

TOM MACDONALD/YOUTUBE, 3

THE RISE OF FOX NEWS RAP

MacDonald's music videos are a case study in rage-built viral fame. Each sets out to troll and "trigger" those who might take offense. But his videos often feel more like parody than political theater.

"Snowflakes"
The faceless generation of so-called snowflakes, typically composed of figures from local news about college controversies, is among the right's most enduring boogeymen. In the video dedicated to trolling this alleged group, he resorts to every cliché in the book and lands somewhere more confounding than offensive.

"Whiteboy"
The music video for MacDonald's viral single is a gluttonous spread of conservative grievance. He raps about the need for unity — against genuine oppressors like wealthy politicians — while making sure his is the loudest voice in the room. It's a classic Tucker Carlson pump fake, claiming to be balanced while leaning right.

"Everybody Hates Me"
MacDonald has the potential for mainstream appeal precisely for how much he allows himself to be self-deprecating. In the video for "Everybody Hates Me," you almost get the impression that it's an *SNL* skit about conservatives that actually lands the joke. How else could a video this campy be serious?

I get the call that my husband has Covid while driving to watch MacDonald shoot a music video for the upcoming album with Calhoun. I'm alarmed but not exceedingly worried. Omicron is hitting New York, and half the people I know are getting positive test results.

Now Rockafeller is scared. "Alice had three tests, babe," MacDonald says, reassuring her.

MacDonald empathizes with the Covid anti-maskers. "Sometimes I feel bad," he says. "A lot of my followers are out protesting mandates. And yo, that's so dope. I'm proud of you for fighting for your freedom. I wish I could be out there with you. But I can't."

Rockafeller's asthma has always been severe. She's ended up in the hospital after catching a cold. It's radically shaped the couple's approach to Covid. "All these people are like, 'Masks don't work, gotta fight the power, blah blah blah,'" MacDonald says. "You didn't watch your girlfriend almost die three times this year, from breathing shit. Like suck a fucking dick."

Because of my visit, Rockafeller had decided to finally get her first Covid-19 vaccine. MacDonald wasn't a fan of the idea, but ultimately he supported her decision to do it. The nurse came to their house. When the shot was injected, Rockafeller blacked out from panic. "I caught her after she fell into the doctor's shit," MacDonald recalls. "And I dragged her out to the front lawn and woke her up."

Rockafeller wants MacDonald to get vaccinated, too, but he's reluctant. He's had health scares before, been misdiagnosed by doctors. The vaccine was likely safe, he thought, but only when you compare it to Covid-19 – which they were successfully avoiding by seeing no one.

That evening, I'm eating dinner alone in my trailer while the couple set up for the outdoor video shoot. MacDonald calls me: There's a problem. Rockafeller is panicking and hiding in the shower. The reason: When we shoot the video, she's realized, MacDonald won't be wearing a mask. How can she be certain I won't give him Covid?

"Once fear ignites, it burns brighter and hotter and bigger at a rapid rate," MacDonald says cryptically. "You're experiencing negative thoughts as if they're reality." What was Rockafeller feeling right now? "Anxiety. Wondering. Not doing much. Probably crying in bed trying to calm herself, probably overreacting to symptoms that may or not be there. I'm not her, though."

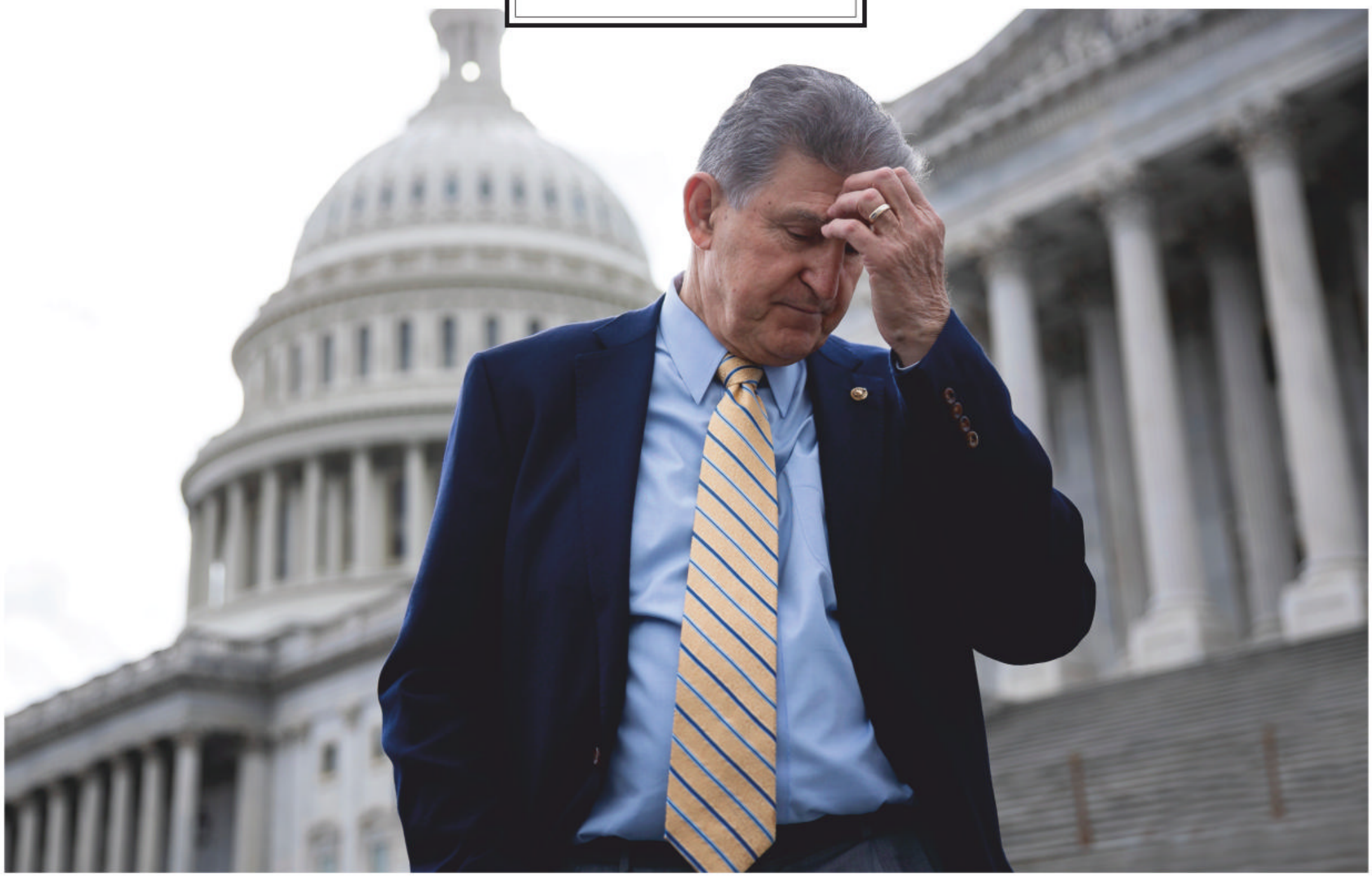
I wait for an hour, doom-scrolling about Omicron on my phone. I listen to the trailer generator hum, thinking about what it must have been like to spend 20 months inside.

In an hour, I get another call from MacDonald. Rockafeller's still panicking, but she's decided to go through with letting me watch them shoot their video, if only because she doesn't have much of a choice. One condition is that I'll need to stay at a farther distance.

I sit 30 feet away from them that night, so much farther than planned that I might as well be watching the performance on an iPhone screen. The set has been designed to look apocalyptic: army-navy supplies, a crumpled map, brick wall covered in blood-like red paint, window boarded up with distressed two-by-fours.

I can't hear every word they're saying, so I place my recorder on the floor by the set, a prosthetic ear. I gather this much: In a tiny pocket of reality in this backyard in suburban California, a whole world is hiding, one where America is in flames and the good guys are living in abandoned buildings as they fight for their survival against the tyrannical forces of feminism, communism, and abortion.

In between each take, MacDonald puts on a new mask.



How Joe Manchin Walked Away From Saving Democracy

Biden promised to fix voting rights. The only problem was the senator from West Virginia had other ideas

By ANDY KROLL

"GIDDY" IS NOT A WORD people use to describe Jon Tester. The towering senior U.S. senator from Montana is blunt and pragmatic. In the halls of Congress, he's one of the last surviving rural Democrats. When he's not in Washington, D.C., Tester runs a dirt farm in Montana that's been in his family for three generations.

A dirt-farming rural Democrat knows better than to overhype. So it came as a surprise when, one day this winter, Tester showed up visibly excited at the office of his friend Michael Bennet, one of Colorado's two Democratic senators, to share a tantalizing piece of information.

"I think we're gonna get this voting-rights thing done," he said to Bennet.

"You got to be kidding me," Bennet said.

Tester said that Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia, a critical swing vote on sweeping voting-rights reforms, had signaled his support for the bill and, more crucially, the parliamentary-rules change needed to bypass a Republican filibuster of that bill. "I think it's gonna happen," Tester said.

For the previous six months, Tester and two of his colleagues, Tim Kaine of Virginia and Angus King of Maine, had lobbied Manchin on voting rights and the fate of the filibuster. On weekends and holidays, on conference calls and huddled in one another's hideaways in the bowels of the Capitol, Kaine, King, and Tester had urged Manchin to support his party's proposal for overhauling the country's voting laws.

They needed him, with Senate Democrats holding onto the barest majority possible – 50 votes, with Vice President Kamala Harris acting as tiebreaker. Not a single Republican had said they would support the voting bill, which left Democrats with only one path to passage: Change the filibuster, the procedural tactic that requires a 60-vote majority to advance most types of legislation. Manchin had remained steadfast in his opposition to this plan, arguing that the filibuster protected small states like his and forced lawmakers to seek bipartisan compromise. Yet during months of conversations with Kaine, King, and Tester, Manchin had increasingly lamented the dysfunction in the Senate. He wanted, as he put it, "some good rule changes to make the place work better."

By early January, Manchin had given the impression – at least according to his colleagues – that he was ready to amend the filibuster in a way that would open a path to passing voting rights. At the end of one of their calls, Tester recalls saying that with everyone in agreement on a filibuster deal, all they had to do was put the finishing touches on the voting legislation

OBSTACLE TO REFORM According to Manchin's colleagues, he flip-flopped on voting to reform the filibuster and voting rights.

FRANCIS CHUNG/E&E NEWS/POLITICO/AP IMAGES

itself and they were ready to proceed. "Yeah," Manchin replied, according to Tester.

A "yes" vote from Manchin could not have been more critical for free and fair elections. The Republican Party responded to Joe Biden's victory with a backlash on the right to vote. Last year, GOP-run legislatures passed 34 laws in at least 19 states that limit access to voting, put partisan operatives in charge of running elections, and make it harder to participate in American democracy. At the same time, a belief that the last election was somehow stolen or fraudulent – the so-called Big Lie – has become an article of faith for many Republicans.

In response to this onslaught, Democrats in Congress introduced multiple pieces of legislation and vowed to pass the bills in time for the 2022 midterms. In public, Democratic leaders spoke in existential terms about the need for reform. "Failure is not an option," Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said. In private, lawmakers and activists predicted victory, arguing that the importance of the issue would overcome the challenge of unifying a 50-member caucus.

They were wrong.

ROLLING STONE interviewed more than 30 key figures inside and outside of Congress to understand how the most ambitious voting-rights bill in generations and the Democratic Party's main policy response to the Jan. 6 insurrection ended in failure. The blame for this defeat, sources say, lies with multiple parties: Manchin either strung along his party for months with no intention of actually supporting the reforms or gave indications to his colleagues that he was on board only to reverse his position on multiple occasions. Senate Democrats, meanwhile, miscalculated that if they could flip Manchin, another swing vote, Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, would follow his lead. As for the White House, these sources say, President Biden – despite saying as a candidate that "one of the first things I'll do as president" is restore the Voting Rights Act – never seemed fully committed to passing voting-rights legislation. When Biden, who had vowed to run an "FDR-sized presidency," did inject himself into the negotiations late in the fight, his contributions did more harm than good.

Manchin spokeswoman Sam Runyon says the senator "never said he was open to eliminating the filibuster." If his colleagues believed that, she adds, they were mistaken. The White House responds by saying just because "we didn't get the result we wanted, we can't say the power of the presidency wasn't behind it." Nevertheless, a question lingers: Why did Democrats' efforts fail?

"It was like riding a roller coaster," Sen. Tester tells ROLLING STONE. "There were many nights when I went to bed and I thought, 'This thing is done. We just have to hammer out the details.' But then something would always happen," he added. "I don't know what happened. I can guess. But I don't know."

ONE DAY LAST SPRING, Sen. Kaine got a call from Sen. Schumer, the Democratic leader. The House of Representatives had passed the For the People Act, a massive bill that sought to make it easier to vote, drag so-called dark money into the sunlight, combat gerrymandering, and modernize election equipment. Now, it was the Senate's turn to take up the For the People Act. Every Senate Democrat had endorsed the bill except for one: Manchin. Schumer knew that Kaine had a good working relationship with Manchin dating back to their days as governors, and so according to Kaine, Schumer asked him, "Can you try to get Manchin on this bill?"

Kaine wasn't on the judiciary or rules committees, but he made sense for other reasons. Before Kaine got into statewide politics in Virginia, he had worked as a civil-rights lawyer for 18 years, and voting rights had long been an obsession of his. The seat he now held in the Senate previously belonged to Harry Byrd Sr. and Harry Byrd Jr., two giants of 20th-century politics who were unapologetic racists and segregationists who opposed the landmark civil-rights laws of the 1960s and 1970s. The historical legacy of the Byrd family weighed on Kaine; so, too, did the more recent experience of witnessing firsthand an attack on the Capitol that was intended to disenfranchise 80 million people. "The seat that I hold and the moment in history in which I'm in the Senate, they have made this a cause unlike any other for me," Kaine says.

GRASSROOTS Activists lobby for the John Lewis Voting Rights Act. In response to Jan. 6 and a GOP assault on voting rights across the country, Biden and the Democrats said they were determined to protect the vote, but still fell short.

ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES

Kaine began talking with Manchin about the For the People Act and what it would take for Manchin to support it. Manchin had concerns about giving the federal government more power to approve or reject voting-rule changes at the local level. The broad use of consent decrees made Manchin fear that "savvy lawyers could go into cash-strapped localities" and bog those places down in lawsuits about voting practices. Mostly, though, Manchin couldn't support Congress approving an 800-page bill about American elections along strict party lines. Doing so, he explained, "will destroy the already weakening binds of our democracy." Republicans needed to be a part of the process.

On this point, Kaine knew he had a problem. It would take 10 Senate Republicans to join all 50 Democrats to pass any voting changes. Only six Republicans had voted in favor of a bipartisan panel modeled after the 9/11 Commission to investigate the Jan. 6 attack. "I said, 'That is the North Star,' " Kaine recalls. " 'We will never get more votes than that from them for anything in the voting space.' " What's more, a Republican senator (whom Kaine declined to name) told him that Minority Leader Mitch McConnell had two red lines: voting rights and campaign-finance reform. "Those are his only two thou-shalt-nots," the unnamed GOP senator told Kaine. (McConnell's office didn't respond to a request for comment.)

The path to passage for any voting law would instead require reforming the filibuster. Kaine and his colleagues needed to find a way to persuade Manchin to support such a move. Democrats also needed to do the same with Sen. Sinema from Arizona. Unlike Manchin, Sinema had co-sponsored the For the People Act and considered herself a vocal supporter of stronger voting protections. Yet from the moment she joined the Senate, Sinema opposed any changes to the filibuster. Despite her clear position, some Senate Democrats as well as leading activists believed that Sinema would not want to be the lone "no" vote on reform if Manchin signed on. "All along our theory was: Get Manchin, and if we get Manchin, we get Sinema," a source involved in the negotiations tells ROLLING STONE.

ONE FRIDAY IN JULY, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Majority Leader Schumer met with President Biden at the White House. Eventually, the discussion turned to voting rights and the filibuster. When the time came to change the Senate rules for voting rights, Biden told them, he would take an active role lobbying any wavering Senate Democrats. According to a source briefed on the White House's position, Biden told Schumer: "Chuck, you tell me when you need me to start making phone calls."

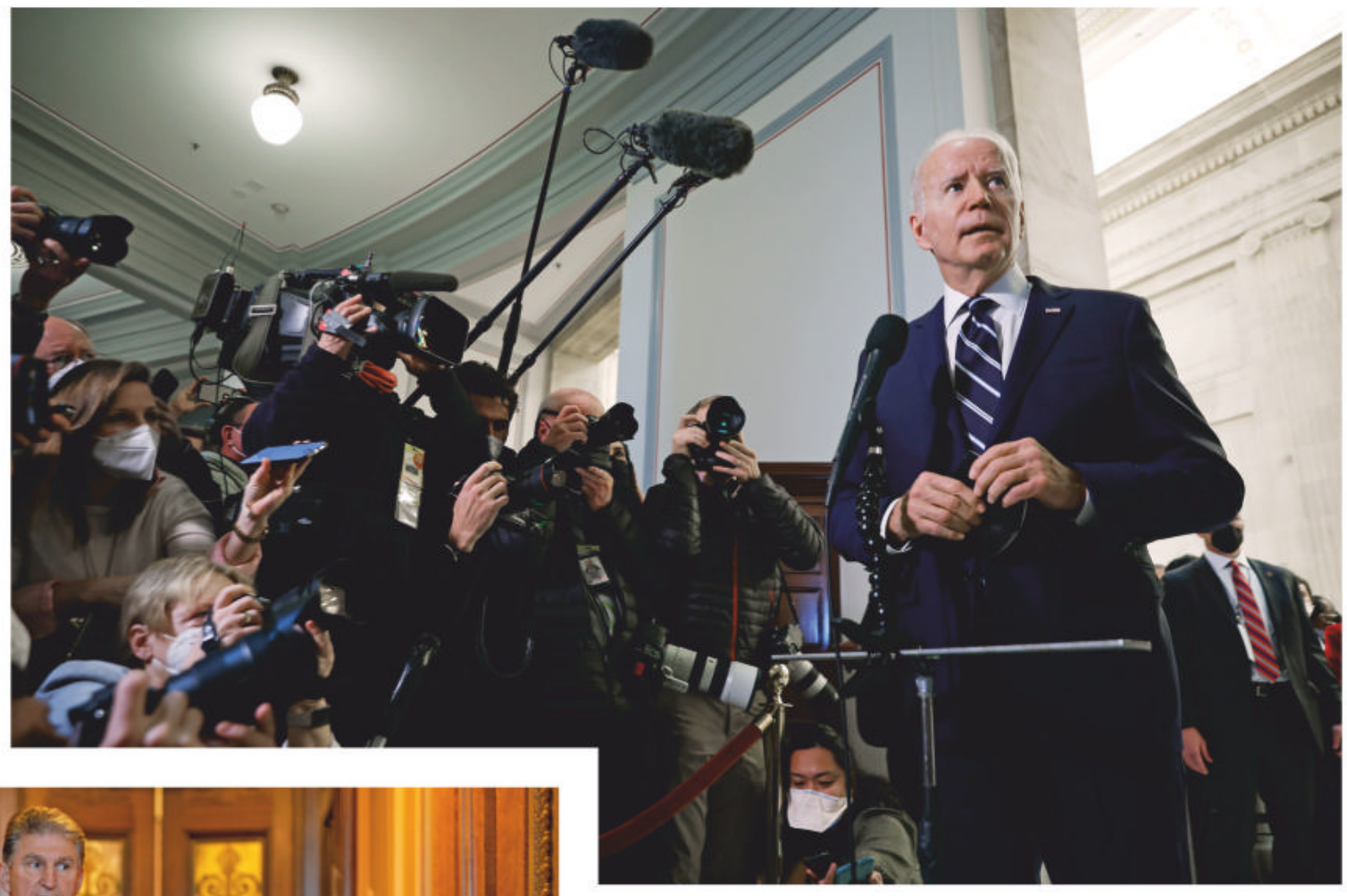
Up to that point, senators and activists saw the White House as MIA in the voting-rights push. Anonymous quotes given by people close to the White House voiced skepticism about the prospect of passing any voting legislation in Congress. The Associated Press reported that "frustrated" White House aides "seeing the reality in the Senate, believe too much of a focus has been placed on federal legislative measures" to protect the vote. To activists, each negative blind quote felt like a stab in the back.

Civil-rights leaders pressed Biden to "take to the bully pulpit and fight" against the GOP's voter-suppression laws, says Rev. Al Sharpton. Biden responded by traveling to Philadelphia and giving a rousing speech, but back in Washington, his priorities appeared to be elsewhere.

Throughout the fall of 2021, the president focused his negotiating energies on two other bills: a bipartisan deal to fund infrastructure repairs and the sweeping, $1.75 trillion Build Back Better (BBB) Act. Biden seemed to believe his transformative, FDR-esque moment had come, and he spent the next several months in talks

with Manchin and Sinema to persuade them to support Build Back Better. Voting rights, by all indications, was a secondary concern.

In the background, though, Kaine kept up the pressure on Manchin. Even after Manchin declared his opposition to the original For the People Act in a widely read op-ed, saying he couldn't envision passing such a bill with only Democratic votes, Kaine and several other Senate allies, a group that would come to include Tester and independent King, continued their talks with Manchin, asking him what it would take to get his support. They saw it as an encouraging sign that Manchin had said that "inaction is not an option" on protecting the right to vote. Eventually, Manchin took out a piece of paper and jotted down a list of priorities. He wanted automatic voter registration any time someone went to the DMV or interacted with state government. He wanted to make Election Day a federal holiday. He wanted a mandatory 15 days of early in-person voting in every state and a ban on partisan gerrymandering. His demand for some version of a voter ID requirement rankled liberal activists, but Democrats believed that to be a minor concession in exchange for passing the larger bill. The new measure would also include policies to stop future attempts at election subversion. The new bill, per Manchin's request, would be named the Freedom to Vote Act.



A TALE OF TWO JOES Biden vowed that "one of the first things I'll do as president" is restore the Voting Rights Act. But, critics say he turned his attention to his Build Back Better plan instead. Manchin and Sinema refused to reform the filibuster, dooming the legislation.

But before Manchin would commit to the new bill and tweaking the filibuster, he wanted to try the Republicans again, with Kaine's help. The two senators met with their GOP colleagues and offered them deals that Schumer hadn't authorized. "We were trying every skeleton key on the key ring to see if we could unlock the door to get Republican support," Kaine says.

One outcome of this exercise, Kaine says, was to show Manchin that no amount of good-faith bargaining would win over Republicans. Instead, McConnell and his caucus used the filibuster to block debate on every piece of democracy-related legislation introduced by Democrats. The same GOP senators who had sung the praises of the late John Lewis would not allow the Senate to even debate the John Lewis Voting Rights Act or the Freedom to Vote Act despite Manchin's across-the-aisle outreach.

While Manchin remained opposed to filibuster reform in public, he began making comments in private meetings that seemed to suggest he was moving closer to yes. In a late-August meeting with a small group of West Virginia faith leaders, Manchin said that he valued the filibuster but did not believe preserving the filibuster outweighed protecting voting rights, according to a person who was briefed on the meeting. (Manchin's spokeswoman disputes this characterization.) This was seen as an encouraging sign – short of a hard commitment, but evidence that Manchin could be moved. Democrats and outside activists agreed that any talk of "abolishing" or "weakening" the filibuster would scare off Manchin, so they framed their lobbying blitz as an effort to "restore the Senate" and make it work better.

A filibuster-reform proposal crafted by Sen. Jeff Merkley of Oregon and several others was a far cry from eliminating the filibuster. The proposal had three parts: It lowered the 60-vote threshold needed to begin debating a bill to a simple majority; guaranteed that each party could offer at least five amendments to a bill; and replaced the secret filibuster with the talking filibuster, allowing the minority party to block a vote for weeks and possibly months so long as it had a member speaking on the Senate floor. But when that extended debate period was up, the Senate would vote and a simple majority was good enough to pass the bill. "It eliminated the potential of one person having veto power over the other 99," Kaine says. "It restored the filibuster back to what I thought the filibuster was supposed to be."

With Manchin deeply involved in the negotiations over filibuster reform, Senate Democrats and their outside partners looked to Biden to follow through on his pledge to pressure Manchin and Sinema. "The key for Biden never was what he was going to say publicly," says Fred Wertheimer, founder and president of the clean-government group Democracy 21. "The key was what he was going to do in the endgame." But the White House kept its focus on Build Back Better even as the talks there showed no sign of a breakthrough. Manchin refused to support the expanded child-tax credit in the bill, claiming it would incentivize parents not to work, and he opposed several key climate provisions as a senator who represented a coal-producing state and earned a small fortune from holdings in his family's coal-processing business. He wanted to shelve the deal until a later time and, according to Kaine and Tester, turn his attention fully to voting rights and the filibuster.

A decisive moment came on Dec. 14, when Manchin went to the White House to meet with Biden. According to two sources briefed on the meeting, Manchin had expected a productive conversation about pausing BBB and shifting focus to voting rights and the filibuster. Instead, Biden was upset. He criticized Manchin for what he felt was the senator's duplicity during the BBB talks, accusing Manchin of backtracking on a pledge to support BBB he'd made weeks earlier during a visit to Biden's house in Wilmington. (Manchin's spokeswoman says this was "not a correct accounting of this meeting" but declined to say why. The White House wouldn't comment on it.) Later that week Manchin appeared on Fox News and declared BBB dead. "I cannot vote to continue with this piece of legislation," he said. "This is a no."

The next morning, Manchin met again with his filibuster working group. The progress Kaine, King, and Tester felt they had made over the preceding months was slipping away. "[Biden] chose to sequence the debate by insisting he deal first with Build Back Better and

FROM TOP: CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES; KENT NISHIMURA/"LOS ANGELES TIMES"/GETTY IMAGES

ANDY KROLL *wrote "The MAGA Laboratory for Autocracy," about the GOP's continuing attempt to overturn the 2020 election, in February.*

only then would he consider voting rights, and that sequencing was costly," says Wade Henderson, the interim president of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. But King, Kaine, and Tester believed that they could still win over Manchin despite the breakdown between Manchin and the White House. The four senators stayed in constant contact over the holiday break and into the new year. Even when Kaine was stranded overnight on I-95 on his way from Richmond, Virginia, to attend a voting-rights meeting in Washington, with nothing but an orange and Dr. Pepper to fuel him, he called into the meeting from his car.

His colleagues' commitment was not lost on Manchin. It was soon afterward that Manchin gave one of his most encouraging signs related to the filibuster, according to Tester, which prompted the senator from Montana to relay that promising news to Bennet. Kaine, too, believed they had gotten Manchin to yes. "I thought we were there a couple of times," Kaine says. "But maybe that was just me."

FINALLY, after months of waiting, the moment had arrived. Democrats and voting-rights activists sprang into action for a final frantic push to persuade Manchin and Sinema to support filibuster changes and the John Lewis Voting Rights Act and Freedom to Vote Act. Schumer told allies on one call that he had mobilized every high-profile surrogate possible, including Oprah Winfrey, to sway the two senators. Biden traveled to Atlanta and delivered a fiery speech calling on the Senate to deliver new voting protections. "I ask every elected official in America: How do you want to be remembered?" he said. "At consequential moments in history, they present a choice: Do you want to be on the side of Dr. King or George Wallace? Do you want to be on the side of John Lewis or Bull Connor? Do you want to be on the side of Abraham Lincoln or Jefferson Davis?"

Two days later, Biden said he would make an appearance at a private meeting of the Senate Democratic caucus to rally the group before a scheduled vote on the John Lewis and Freedom to Vote bills. Just as Biden was about to head to the Capitol that day, Sen. Sinema appeared on the Senate floor to give a speech. There had been warning signs: Sinema's recent interactions with civil-rights leaders and other influential progressive groups had left the groups frustrated. On a Zoom call with the heads of the Leadership Conference, NAACP, Urban League, and other African American organizations, Sinema seemed to be tuned out. She refused to turn her camera on, and her disembodied voice suggested she was dismissive of the arguments put before her on why she should vote to amend the filibuster. "As my grandmother would say, she blew by that argument like a freight train blowing past trash," says Henderson of the Leadership Conference.

The attempts to win over Sinema had come in the final stages of the filibuster battle. John LaBombard, who was Sinema's top spokesman at the time, says there was much less of an effort to persuade the Arizona senator to change her mind than there had been with Joe Manchin, even though Sinema's vote was just as crucial as Manchin's in the final count. LaBombard says he couldn't escape the impression that Democratic leadership either took Sinema's vote for granted or considered her longstanding opposition to changing the filibuster somehow less sincere or authentic than Manchin's. "It would be a mistake on anyone's part to engage in any wishful thinking that Sen. Sinema's policy or tactical positions are somehow contingent on the positions of other colleagues and are not sincerely held," LaBombard says.

On the morning of Biden's planned visit to the Democratic caucus in mid-January, Sinema gave one of the longest floor speeches of her career. She restated that she would not under any circumstances get rid of the 60-vote filibuster. "When one party need only negotiate with itself, policy will inextricably be pushed from the middle towards the extremes," she said.

When Manchin asked Biden about the history of the filibuster, the president's answer was so unconvincing that sources say Sen. Merkley had to intervene and give a more substantive response.

Soon after Sinema finished speaking, Biden arrived at the closed-door Senate Democratic caucus meeting. Anyone hoping for a rousing call to action or LBJ-style browbeating was disappointed. Biden drifted from one side of the room to the other, at times speaking so softly that senators struggled to hear him, according to one source in the room. "His style was very much 'I'm here among friends,'" the source says. "He decided not to give the stump speech of someone who stands up and says, 'This is the moment that history changes in America and you all decide which way it goes.'" When Manchin asked Biden a question about the history of the filibuster, Biden's answer was so unconvincing that Schumer motioned to Sen. Jeff Merkley to intervene and give a more substantive response, according to multiple witnesses.

Once the meeting was over, Biden walked to the crowd of reporters gathered outside the room and did something inexplicable: With the final vote still days away, he declared defeat. "I hope we can get this done, but I'm not sure," he told the press. "Like every other major civil-rights bill that came along, if we miss the first time, we can come back and try it a second time. We missed this time."

It was mystifying to the senators and the activist groups that had spent the past year and tens of millions of dollars trying to get this far. Yet it also felt representative of the Biden White House's half-assed and confusing role in the entire voting-rights campaign. "We have seen what an all-out effort from the White House looks like when they are trying to pass a bill, and we never saw that same level of effort from the White House to pass the Freedom to Vote Act," says Tiffany Muller, president of End Citizens United and End Citizens United Action Fund, one of the leading outside groups pushing for voting-rights and filibuster reform. There were brief moments of help from the White House, she adds, "but we never got a White House that was fully bought into winning this fight."

The White House declined to comment on the record for this story. A senior administration official, who refused to be named, says these criticisms of the administration are "people playing Monday-morning quarterback." Within months of taking office, the official adds, Biden said he supported restoring the talking filibuster. He gave speeches and made private entreaties to senators. As for Manchin and Sinema, the official says, "I don't think there was anything the president could do to change those two votes on the filibuster."

Going into the final vote on filibuster reform on Jan. 19, it was clear that the votes weren't there. Sinema had given her forceful floor speech, and Manchin announced he would not in the end vote to alter the filibuster. In a statement sent to ROLLING STONE, Manchin said: "Since coming to the Senate in 2010, I have come to understand that the filibuster is our last check on power no matter who is in the majority. And it has protected our great nation from volatile political swings for more than 233 years."

When Schumer called the final vote on the combined John Lewis Voting Rights and Freedom to Vote acts, Republicans filibustered the legislation yet again. And when Democrats at last forced a vote on changing the filibuster, Manchin and Sinema voted with the Republicans against it. Some Democrats and activists couldn't help but notice that Vice President Harris, who had come to the Senate to preside over the vote, left before it officially finished.

In a recent interview, Kaine, the Democratic senator, said that while he and many of his colleagues are "discouraged" by how the voting-rights battle finished, he hasn't given up.

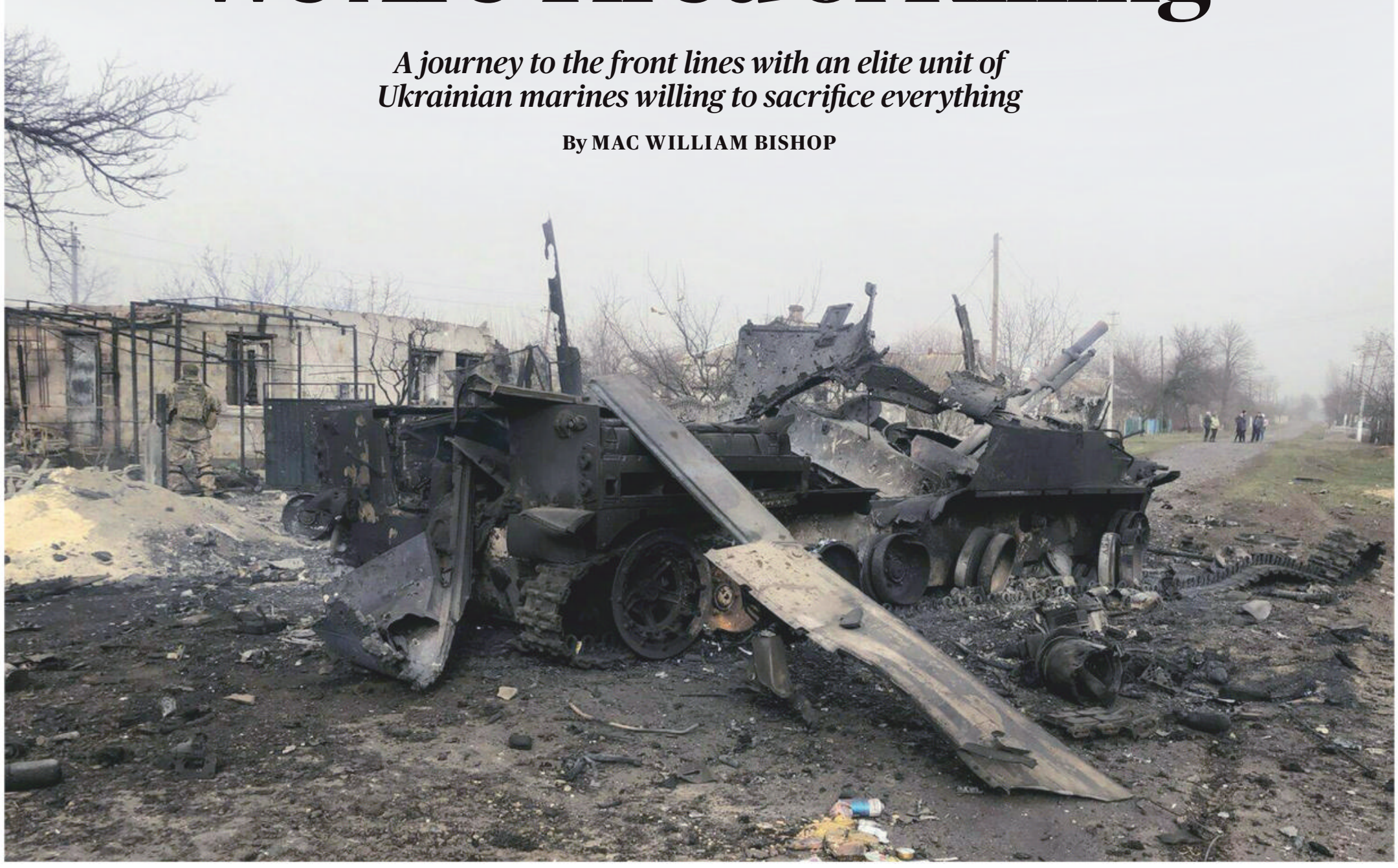
"The guys that held my seat, Harry Byrd Sr. and then Harry Byrd Jr., were masters at using the filibuster to try to block passage of civil-rights legislation, including voting-rights legislation," Kaine says. "But it didn't stop. The temporary setbacks were not accepted as permanent setbacks, and we're not going to accept them either."

When I last spoke with Sen. Tester, he had just come from a classified briefing on China. He drew a connection between what he'd heard in that briefing and the voting-rights push. "The gridlock and the division here in the United States, they [the Chinese] love it," Tester says. "It plays into their hands; it plays into what they want to do. And so consequently, we are where we are, and we may not even realize that oftentimes we're our own worst enemy."

‘We Are Tired of Killing’

A journey to the front lines with an elite unit of Ukrainian marines willing to sacrifice everything

By MAC WILLIAM BISHOP



AMBUSH Ukrainian marines examine the remains of an armored vehicle after thwarting a Russian attack in Donetsk. Russian forces continue trying to move forward and seize territory in eastern Ukraine despite fierce resistance.

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE OF UKRAINE

“THE RUSSIANS ARE JUST OVER THERE.” The Ukrainian marine driving the truck peers intently into the swirling snow, pointing to the line of trees about a half-mile ahead of us. The Russians, he tells me, “they leave their bodies where they fall,” and shakes his head.

His name is Oleksiy, and he has been full of bonhomie, quips, and curiosity – until we get close enough to the front lines that a forward observer could decide to direct an artillery round at our unarmored pickup. “Listen, if something happens, if something bad happens…” he says, and turns to look me in the eye. “You do whatever you need to do to get out of here.”

The dirt road runs between two wheat fields that are barren and unplowed. No one will plant crops here this year.

We are in Donetsk, where Ukraine has been fighting Russia for eight years in brutal trench warfare. The battle lines were static for most of that time. Now they are not. Russian soldiers have grabbed a chunk of Ukraine’s southeast, and are gaining ground. The marines are here to take it back.

Oleksiy begins driving forward again. The line of trees hiding units of Russia’s 163rd Tank and 11th Motorized Rifle regiments creeps closer.

More than a month into Russia’s invasion and the Ukrainian armed forces stand defiant against one of the world’s largest militaries. Here in Donetsk, members of an elite unit give a rare glimpse into how they continue cobbling together their country’s defense out of ad hoc supplies, mismatched weaponry, improvised tactics, and unlikely volunteers.

While the entire population has been mobilized for war, it is the Ukrainian military that has been fighting to the death in city streets, villages, and in the countryside. Against all expectations, they have routed mighty enemy formations, but the war is far from over. Russia is willing to endure the loss of thousands of its soldiers. For their part, the Ukrainians are united by shared national sacrifice. The last time there was an announcement of casualty figures by the government, more than 1,300 Ukrainian soldiers had been killed. That was two weeks into the war. About a month later, there is no updated tally: A presidential adviser has described military losses as “considerable,” saying the government won’t release figures until after the war. The Ukrainians grudgingly trade land for blood. Yet the price they are paying to save their country may be unbearable.

To get a clearer picture of the shape and course of the conflict, ROLLING STONE traveled to multiple battlefronts, meeting with frontline soldiers, and observing conditions firsthand.

IT TAKES DAYS to reach the eastern front from western Ukraine. Lyubomyr Zaboronnyy, who runs part of an aid group called East and West United, lets me tag along on his volunteer supply convoy. He was a battlefield medic and has been bringing home the bodies of fallen soldiers since the war with Russia started in 2014. His group works with the Ukrainian diaspora across Europe and America to gather supplies and vehicles to bring to soldiers in the field.

Zaboronnyy is a large man with a crew cut and a boisterous, over-the-top physicality. He will shepherd a string of land cruisers, pickups, and vans filled to capacity with boxes of fruit, vegetables, baked goods, pickles, dumplings, pasta, electronics, clothing, camping gear, and medical supplies across Ukraine.

"It's all crowd-funded," Zaboronnyy says. "I was even sent money from Moscow today. I don't know what to do with it. We need a ton of money. But I won't use money from Russia."

Soldiers on the front send his group requests, and they deliver anything they can get. He said the hardest things to acquire now are the most critical: ballistic vests and plates, helmets, long-distance radios, and trucks.

"If we put stuff into the normal supply chain, it just disappears into the void," he says. "This way I can ensure people get what they need by placing it in their hands."

It's what logistics specialists call "last-mile delivery." Zaboronnyy and his team are a nonprofit Amazon Prime for combat supplies.

"PUTIN CAN SUCK my cock." The bear of a man delivering this exclamation in a theatrical baritone says he should be called "Martin."

Martin drives around the city of Kryvyi Rih pointing out landmarks, including the closed factory, where in peacetime he worked in the industrial demolitions department.

As Martin drives, he makes pronouncements like the one about Putin. He's not having a conversation. Everything about Martin projects "Don't fuck with me" machismo. He's an amateur heavyweight boxer, two yards tall and muscular. His grizzled gray beard is cropped close, and so is his hair. His deep voice booms, and he pounds the table with his fist when he speaks. He carries a Kalashnikov variant, an RPG-22 rocket launcher, an RPK light machine gun, a Makarov pistol in a chest holster, grenades, and a long knife engraved with the words "Our freedom – their blood" in Ukrainian.

Within minutes of meeting him, he is giving tips on avoiding snipers and showing off a video of a Russian prisoner being questioned. The Russian was stripped down to his boxers, and his face and neck were covered in blood from what appeared to be a broken nose. His hands were tied behind his back, but he seemed otherwise unharmed.

I ask what happened to the prisoner. Martin just shrugs and says nothing further about it.

The word is that Martin killed two Russians with his knife. It is rare in modern combat for anyone to get close enough to kill someone with a knife. And I think about the prisoner. I hope that isn't what people mean when they say Martin killed two Russians with his knife. Later, I ask Martin to clarify about the knife. He understands the seriousness of the implications of what I'm asking. He tells me that indeed, he killed two Russians with the blade. But it was in close combat, he says: One was a sentry, and one was a commando. He hates the Russians for what they've done.

Kryvyi Rih is President Volodomyr Zelensky's hometown. The Russians have advanced to within a dozen miles or so of the city, the farthest north they've gotten in their thrust out of Crimea. Martin is helping to organize the city's defenses. He commands a large number of Territorial Defense Force volunteers, irregular soldiers responsible for their own equipment, and seemingly for their own command structure as well. He has to deliver one of his men to a rally point, where two units are in contact with the Russians, south of Kryvyi Rih.

We drop the volunteer off at the side of the road, where he takes cover in a copse of trees. I ask Martin what he can tell me about the Ukrainian forces, and what they are doing here.

He says no, he can't tell me anything for security reasons. "It's enough for you to know they are out there," he says, gesturing at the landscape where his forces lie in wait for the Russian army.

The quiet morning is broken by the concussions of artillery, punctuated by the *whoosh-whoosh-whooshing* of Grad multiple-launch rocket systems, which can fire 40 10-foot-long rockets in seconds and can hit targets 25 miles away. The distinctive sound means the Grads are very close, but the fire is outgoing.

The Ukrainian army is counter-attacking the Russians near a hamlet called Vysokopillya. But it is slow going: Ukraine wins back a few square miles of land over a week of battle here. The fighting is village to village, and brutal. And it is just one small piece of Ukraine taken back from the enemy.

AFTER FOUR DAYS on the road, the convoy arrives at a derelict schoolhouse in Donetsk just before dusk, a few miles from the front lines. From here, the Russians are both to the south and to the east.

The schoolhouse is being used by Ukrainian marines as a supply hub. It's in the middle of a village that seems abandoned, but smoke wisps from a few chimneys, and an old man peeks out at passing vehicles from behind a fence. Many who have stayed behind here are just too old to contemplate becoming refugees. They'd rather die in their homes than take to the road to live among strangers.

The vehicles park, and two pirates step out of a van. They are both towering, lean, hard, and bearded. One carries a marksman's rifle on his back, the other a camouflaged AK-74. They may look like pirates, but they are from the Ukrainian Naval Infantry Corps – they call themselves marines.

DEFIANCE Above left: Bohdan Maslyak (center), Oleksiy (right), and an unnamed marine with a flag reading "Russian warship, go fuck yourself." Above: Martin shows off his knife inscribed with the words "Our freedom — their blood."

Bohdan Maslyak wears a forest-green bandanna over his head, a trim gray-and-blond beard framing his face. The other man has an earring and a forked beard, and wears a baseball cap with an American flag on the side.

Maslyak is a famous volunteer fighter in Ukraine. There are pictures of him in a recent photo essay called "What I Would Do If It Weren't for the War." But instead of a uniform, he's wearing a chef's jacket, and instead of a rifle, he's holding a chef's knife, cutting vegetables and smiling. The caption says if it weren't for the war, he'd renovate a restaurant and travel the world.

Because of his age and his serious demeanor, I mistake him for the unit commander at first. Only later do I learn he is the lowest rank in the marines. You wouldn't find a forty- or fiftysomething seaman in normal times. But it's a war. Maslyak volunteered to join this elite unit. Who gives a fuck about rank, if it means a chance to go out and fight the people invading your homeland?

The marines take stock of the supplies that Zaboronnyy and his team brought, separating the urgently required items from those that

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can stay behind. Artillery rumbles a mile or so to the south. Maslyak's radio crackles. A Russian attack is underway. The marines need to go. Now.

Zaboronnyy straps on his body armor and races off in his ambulance, following the piratical-looking marines.

As night descends, the artillery fire increases. The village is completely dark; there is not a light on for miles. In the distance there is the red glow of a spreading fire. It is far to the north, fanned by a biting wind that howls through the trees.

Inside the abandoned school, as the soldiers climb into sleeping bags, a young marine sits by the window in oblivion, watching a sitcom on his phone. A fierce spring storm arrives. The thunder of artillery and the wild wind blend together, echoing through the empty rooms. Soon, snores play a countermelody to the furious hum of the gale and the staccato rumbles of battle.

"Can you teach me how to use it?" he asks. I laugh. Surely there are Ukrainians with more recent experience.

"I just really want to know how to use one. We need them."

Haven't the marines been able to use other anti-tank weapons effectively?

Yes, he says. But it's not enough. They need to destroy Russian tanks before the tanks can get close. The factory that made Ukraine's domestic anti-tank missiles is near Kyiv, he says. It's no longer operating. Engaging armor with direct-fire or shorter-range missiles like the British-Swedish NLAW risks Ukrainian lives. The Russians massively outnumber them. They don't have lives to spare.

"Well, shall we go to the front?" he asks. "Since you're from ROLLING STONE, you can meet some rock stars."

IT ISN'T A METAPHOR. As soon as we arrive at a house serving as a combat outpost, I'm introduced to two rock stars, with the worn fatigues and informality of marines who've been in the field for too long.

Their unit was involved in savage urban warfare before being redeployed to counter Russia's renewed efforts in the east. Their losses have been grievous. They provide a specific number, and it is staggering. The marines are exhausted. There are indicators of traumatic stress, but morale remains high.

"We feel the whole country is behind us," Oleg says. "We know what we are fighting for. This is the most important thing."

At the outpost, the marines are using Starlink, the satellite internet service created by Elon Musk. Zaboronnyy had delivered the equipment to them, and they had it up and running in hours. When Musk announced he would provide Starlink free of charge to Ukraine, there were concerns the Russians could use it to locate Ukrainian positions. But Oleksiy says the military has dealt with that.

"Can you do us a favor?" Maslyak asks. "Can you tell Elon Musk 'Thank you, from Ukraine'?"

EASTERN FRONT Above left: A sign marks the boundary of Donetsk province on a highway in eastern Ukraine. Above: Andrii Slieptsov, the lead guitarist for the band Haydamaky, is a reservist in the Ukrainian marines.

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IT'S SNOWING IN THE MORNING. Cold, wet, muddy, and miserable. Low-hanging clouds mean the Russians can't use drones to spot Ukrainian movements or coordinate fire. An exquisite day for infantry.

Zaboronnyy arrives back at the schoolhouse with a strapping marine. He's Oleksiy, and he's here to figure out what to do with me.

"Do you want to see a Russian cruise missile that landed nearby?" he asks. "Let's go."

He hops into a used Nissan pickup newly delivered on a trailer by Zaboronnyy's convoy, and we drive out to a field where there's a crater filled with wreckage.

Before the war, Oleksiy was an IT specialist. His job was to troubleshoot network problems for foreign clients.

"Now, I'm still kind of a troubleshooter," he deadpans.

He tells me that Russia is massing forces for an offensive, and the marines want long-range weapons that can destroy enemy armor in staging areas, before the Russians can start moving. When he finds out I had been in an anti-armor squad in the U.S. Marines, he asks if I have qualified on the Javelin anti-tank missile system.

Andrii Slieptsov and Oleg are musicians with a band called Haydamaky. They're pretty well established in Ukraine. I ask Oleg how he would describe their music.

"Well, the simplest way would be to call it authentic Cossack rock."

Haydamaky is named after peasant insurgents who resisted foreign control by the Poles, the Russians, and the Roman Catholic Church – as well as the local nobility – in the 18th century. Slieptsov plays lead guitar, and Oleg prefers not to be specifically identified. But they're also marine reservists. When the invasion started, they immediately sent their families to safety and joined their battalion in the field. They've been in intense combat for more than a month.

The marines invite me to their outpost on the condition that I not reveal specific operational details or their precise location. Some, like Maslyak, are comfortable sharing their full names and even their faces in photos. Most of the rest are not.

"I had a video chat with my son today for the first time in a while," Oleksiy says happily. Then a brief flash of emotion creases his face. "He told me to make sure I didn't die. What am I supposed to say to that?"

While Oleg is helping me log on to Starlink, about a half-dozen other marines are sitting around smoking, drinking tea, napping, or cleaning rifles. They are snipers. Their job is to scout and hunt. But all of the training, skill, and courage in the world are not enough for a rifle to defeat a tank. So they have to be creative.

They work to lure the Russians into ambushes, targeting vehicle operators at key moments of vulnerability. Then the marines use heavy weapons to destroy or disable the tanks.

Shortly before I arrived at the outpost, a Russian tank group tried to force its way across a nearby river. The marines were waiting in ambush, and eviscerated the Russian unit, destroying or capturing more than half of the enemy vehicles. A marine captain showed me videos of Ukrainian tanks towing captured Russian BMPs from the battlefield, to be repaired and put back into service by the marines. Pirates, indeed.

"These fucking guys brought their dress uniforms in their armored vehicles," the captain said, laughing incredulously as he showed me pictures. "They actually thought they were gonna get a parade."

But the long odds are against the marines.

"If you are playing chess, it doesn't matter if your opponent is an idiot when they have 200 more pawns than you do," Oleksiy says.

Marine snipers are among the most elite personnel in the Ukrainian armed forces. They are under tremendous pressure, not just because of the enemy's numbers, but because the war is being fought in their hometowns. Their families and friends are stuck in the middle of the fighting.

Olena is from Mariupol. She's shy and diminutive, thirtysomething with a long black ponytail. She has a fearsome reputation as a sniper. Even as her unit was sacrificing lives to stop the tide of Russian armor pushing into Donetsk, her daughter was trying to flee Mariupol. Olena

could do nothing to help her daughter. Her duty was with her unit.

The Marines are using inexpensive tablets with a secure tactical operating system put together in weeks by Ukrainian programmers. The goal is to give them greater battlefield awareness. But consumer tech has serious downsides. They have stopped using DJI-brand drones, because one day after they launched a sortie, the Russians hit the pilots' position with eight 120mm mortar rounds just minutes after the drones took off: Their transmissions had been located.

They wear whatever uniform items or tactical clothing they can get their hands on, with most sporting a hodgepodge of different camouflage patterns. They use civilian 4x4s to get around, repainting them or weaving camouflage netting into roof racks.

"This Chevy Tahoe is great," Oleksiy says, resting his hand on a pre-2007-model truck. "That V8 has saved our lives. Twice."

The marines have a low opinion of their adversaries. Oleksiy tells me how a single sniper managed to force a column of nine Russian armored vehicles to retreat. It sounds apocryphal. But one of the snipers nods and says, "Yeah, that was me. They're terrified of Ukrainians."

They make me sit down and feed me cabbage blintzes and coffee. The marines show me a stew they are making, and feed me cake. Their dining table is covered in cans of Red Bull, packs of cigarettes, instant-coffee canisters, a packet of baby wipes, and a large jar of homemade pickles.

"This war isn't really fought with rifles," Oleksiy says. He says Ukraine needs Western military drones, fighter aircraft, and anti-air systems. He goes into great detail about the capabilities of an integrated air-defense network when used with a specific model of the American F-15 Eagle fighter jet. "Give us 10 of those and we can destroy the whole Russian air force."

I ask what the marines think about foreign support for their country. Will NATO "close the skies" over Ukraine, they ask. Almost everyone in the country asks this question. I say I know as much as they do, that Western leaders are afraid a "no-fly zone" could lead to nuclear war. Oleg nods thoughtfully. Oleksiy sneers: "Well, we have already fought Russia for eight years without NATO, anyways."

It's getting late, and it's time to leave. Not a good idea to be on the road in the dark, where the use of headlights will draw enemy fire. But the marines need to go to work. The sniper teams start gearing up. They will go hunting Russians in the twilight.

Bohdan, Oleksiy, and another marine take a moment to pose for pictures with a flag that has Ukraine's new unofficial slogan on it: "Russian warship, go fuck yourself." This was the defiant transmission of a group of border guards on a small island in the Black Sea during the opening days of the invasion, when called upon by the Russian navy to surrender. The words now grace billboards, T-shirts, and posters the length of the country.

Oleksiy grips my hand and shoulder, and says he wants to drink a beer with me someday. In peace, after Ukraine's victory.

"We are tired," Oleksiy says. Then he clarifies his statement. "We are very tired of killing Russians."

MORALE BOOST
Above left: A Ukrainian marine tries to get phone reception in an abandoned schoolhouse that's become a base. Above: A marksman has decorated his rifle and uniform for combat.

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For all the marines' bravado and success against the Russians, the Ukrainian military is suffering terrible losses. With Russia's initial assault against Kyiv a failure against intense opposition, the Kremlin is turning its attention back to the east. It intends to consolidate and expand the swath of Ukraine's southeast that its soldiers grabbed in the opening days of the invasion – a slice of territory roughly the size of Switzerland.

Tens of thousands of occupiers with hundreds of tanks and armored vehicles, supported by artillery, long-range missiles, and air power, continue to ravage Ukrainian cities and villages, and brutalize their inhabitants.

Zaboronnyy's convoy covers a lot of ground, across 12 out of Ukraine's 24 provinces. In the towns and villages, in the cemeteries we drive by, every burial ground has fresh graves, often with a funeral in progress or with mourners lighting vigil candles that seem to hover and flicker, like fireflies in the deepening gloam, as we speed past.

Unlike their adversaries, Ukrainians make every effort to return fallen soldiers to their hometowns. In Kryvyi Rih, Martin took me to the burial site of his friend, who was killed by Russians in Donetsk. The big man lit a cigarette and left it, placing it gently on the grave and saying a prayer. There are a dozen fresh mounds nearby for soldiers killed since the invasion, covered in wreaths and portraits of the dead.

The gravediggers are using a backhoe to cut into the asphalt of the parking lot to make room for more. They want to keep all of the fallen soldiers together in one area, and there just isn't enough space for the amount of death.

As the convoy rambles west, it has one last stop to make. At a morgue in Dnipro, it delivers boxes of body bags. In the parking lot, an orthodox priest chants a prayer song with three mourners. When the entrance of the morgue opens, I realize why the ceremony is taking place outside. There are dozens of dead inside, fresh bodies on gurneys right up to the entrance, their shrouded feet peeking out from inside the doorway.

BEAST MODE

How a gawky kid from small-town North Carolina built a YouTube empire on pranks, do-gooding, and mountains of cold, hard cash

EJ DICKSON

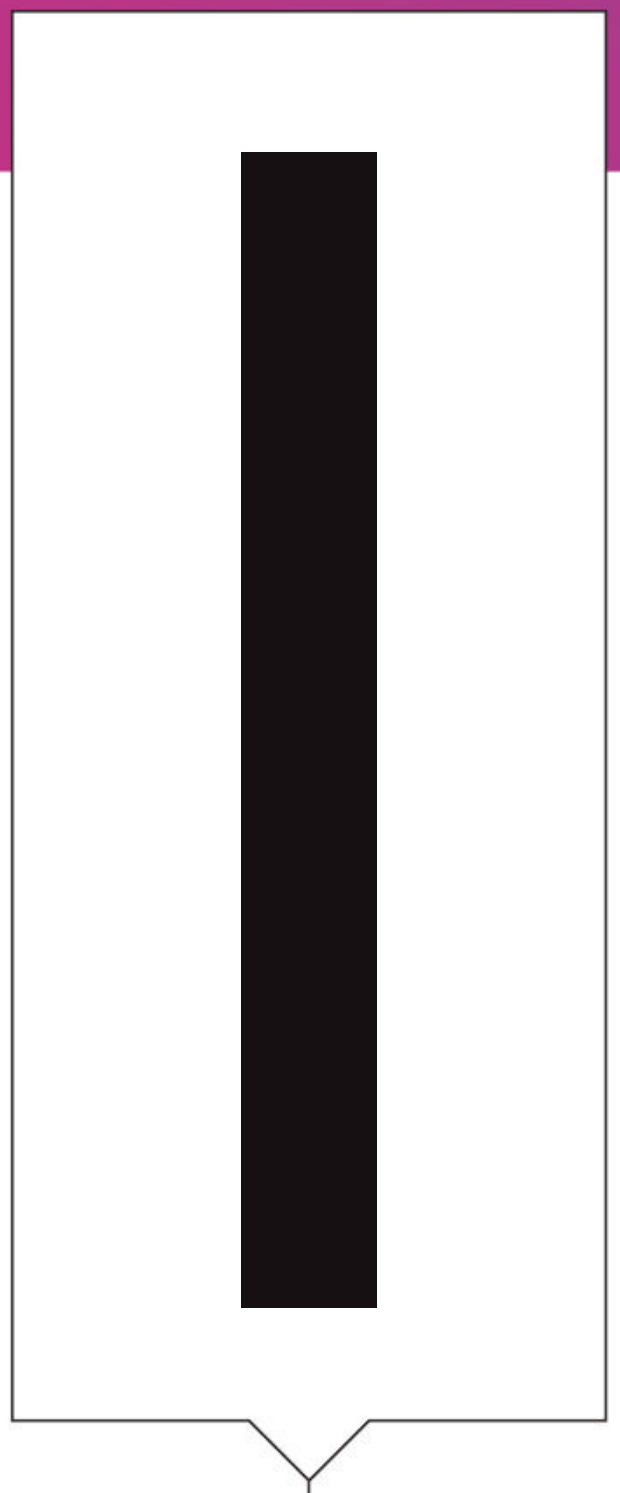
MATTHIAS CLAMER

MAY 2022

THE CREATORS ISSUE

Jimmy Donaldson, a.k.a. MrBeast

MR BEAS



In an undisclosed location in North Carolina, Jimmy Donaldson is about to show me a million dollars in cash.

Donaldson, a.k.a. MrBeast, is the biggest YouTuber in the country and possibly, by the time this story is published, the world. Rangy at six feet two and clad in a gray Nike sweatsuit, Donaldson has been walking me through his company's warehouse, showing off the detritus of various videos made under the MrBeast banner, a melange of stunts, pranks, and eye-popping cash giveaways. In one area, there are piles of GameStop merchandise from a video where he promised to buy everything a contestant could fit into a circumscribed triangle ("He just wanted cash instead," Donaldson says); in another, crates stuffed with inflatable dinosaur costumes for a video titled "Walking Into Random Stores With 100 Dinosaurs." In the back, there are 1 billion Orbeez, tiny gel-filled pellets that Donaldson used to fill his best friend's backyard for a video back in 2018.

Then, we come to the money. "If you wanted to rob us, here's where you'd rob us," Donaldson says.

The cash is guarded by Tracy Parisher, a former physical therapist with bright blue eyes, an eastern Carolina twang, and a completely bald head; he is an operations manager at MrBeast YouTube LLC, and the stepfather of its founder. Piles of bills lie in a steel-plated closet in filing cabinets, stacked neatly in rows, all in ones. Usually, it's a full million, but today there's $100,000 missing, for an upcoming trip to Florida, where Donaldson and his crew will shoot a "Would You Rather" video – as in, would you rather swim with sharks for that money or walk a bridge of alligators. Some of the bills are crumpled on the floor at Donaldson's Adidas sneakers: "It takes up more space and looks better on camera [that way]," he explains.

A funny thing happens when you see a lot of money in one place. As the smell hits my nostrils, crisp and pungent, like a pile of autumn leaves or a Xerox machine on the fritz, I start to think about the ways it could change my life, or the lives of those around me – the medical bills that need to be paid, school tuition, child care; all of the GoFundMe's and charities it could help. I feel almost lightheaded, as if I've taken a right hook from a Paul brother square in the jaw (a recent Beast stunt that came with a $20,000 prize).

The effect does not go unnoticed by Parisher and Donaldson.

"Most of the people around here, they're immune to it," says Parisher.

"Yeah, we're numb," Donaldson says.

"They'll sit here and count it for me and won't even blink an eye nowadays," Parisher says.

"Do you ever just think about how many people's lives this amount of money could change?" I ask.

Donaldson looks at me like I've just asked what color the sky is. "Yeah, exactly," he says. "That's why we have it."

ON HIS YouTube channel, MrBeast, Donaldson is the main character, luring his 92.9 million subscribers to lavish, high-production-value videos with brightly hued thumbnails that cost $10,000 each to produce and titles optimized for YouTube's algorithm, such as "Extreme $1,000,000 Hide-and-Seek" and "World's Most Dangerous Escape Room!" Often, the stunts have the feel of video games: That escape room is actually 10 rooms, each built around a theme, from a Kubrikian "hotel" hallway to a pastoral scene with live goats to an *Indiana Jones*-style moving wall loaded with spikes that closes in on contestants. A Lamborghini "race" sends three of the Italian sports cars zigzagging around town, their drivers on a hunt for clues.

Many of the stunts verge on clickbait. In "I Ate the World's Largest Slice of Pizza," Donaldson attempts to consume a nine-pound, six-foot-long slice. In "Spending 24 Hours Straight Underwater," he survives being submerged for 12-plus hours in a backyard pool, his head inside a chamber rigged with an oxygen pump. Others are do-gooder content in the vein of the 1950s game show *Queen for a Day*, giving homeless people houses or donating $100,000 to random streamers on Twitch. In late 2020, Donaldson started the MrBeast Philanthropy channel, which contributes 100 percent of its revenue to a warehouse that operates mobile food donations throughout eastern North Carolina and reportedly delivered 1,000,563 meals by the end of 2021.

Donaldson also offers his subscribers a chance to get in on a MrBeast windfall through sweepstakes and competitions. Alex Maloney, a 20-year-old from Canada, won $100,000 by holding his finger on a MrBeast app button for more than two days straight, fueled by Uber Eats and Monster energy drinks. Maloney, who is unemployed and mulling whether to go to college, says having that money in the bank has given him a sense of security. "It was monumental. It made me feel more stable," he says, adding that Donaldson "changes lives unbelievably."

In these videos, Donaldson is often flanked by an ensemble of gawky, early-twentysomething white guys, many of whom live in the same cul-de-sac as Donaldson and have carved out extensive YouTube followings of their own: the slight and handsome Chris Tyson, a frequent presence in Donaldson's earliest videos; doe-eyed Chandler Hallow, who grew up playing baseball with Donaldson; and shaggy-haired Karl Jacobs, an upstate New York native who started out as an editor and graduated to a fixture in the group Donaldson refers to as "the boys."

With the boys in tow, Donaldson has built a multimedia empire, raking in a reported $54 million in revenue on his main channel last year. He also has a ghost-kitchen chain, MrBeast Burger, a delivery-only restaurant with 1,600 franchises throughout the country. In January, he launched Feastables, a line of chocolate bars, with a Willy Wonka-esque "Win MrBeast's Chocolate Factory" promo, and he earns an estimated half a million dollars per month in merch.

Over the course of less than a decade, Donaldson has gone from making gaming-commentary videos in his bedroom to managing 60 full-time employees, not counting independent contractors. He has launched various high-profile philanthropic projects, such as the #TeamTrees campaign, in which he set a goal to plant 20 million trees all over the world after raising $20 million in donations; and #TeamSeas, which aims to

Senior writer EJ DICKSON *wrote the Doja Cat cover story for the February issue.*

PREVIOUS AND FOLLOWING SPREADS: FASHION DIRECTOR: ALEX BADIA. STYLING BY STEPHANIE TRICOLA. GROOMING BY AMANDA WILSON. PROP STYLING BY DOMINIQUE BARNES.

Welcome to BeastWorld

Whether he's torturing fans, friends, or fellow influencers with elaborate challenges, Donaldson's video-game-like stunts keep the YouTube masses hooked

CREATORS GONE WILD

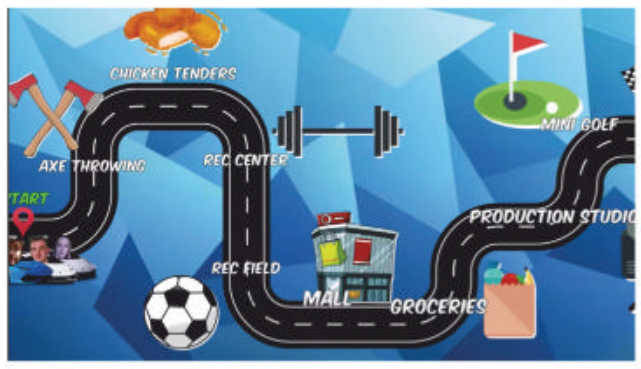
Donaldson gathered 15 top influencers, from Logan Paul to Bella Poarch, Zach King, and others, at Bank of America Stadium to put them through a gauntlet of tasks — like flushing the nearest toilet — with the last one standing winning $1,000,000.

TIME TO LEVEL UP

In "The World's Most Dangerous Escape Room," a contestant had to smash through brick walls, set off TNT in a *Minecraft* set, and jump over "lava" to win.

LAMBORGHINIS EVERYWHERE

Sending three friends on a "race" around Greenville (they weren't allowed to exceed the speed limit), Donaldson had them catch chicken tenders thrown from a rooftop into their mouths, buy him groceries, and make a mini golf hole-in-one, mapping the course for viewers.



FANTASTIC (REAL-LIFE) BEASTS

Donaldson offered three of "the boys" the chance to win $10,000 — to be given to their mothers — if they sat in a bathtub full of live snakes.

remove 30 million pounds of trash from the ocean. He is also, it should be noted, 23 years old. "Five years ago, I had to raise my hand to go use the bathroom," he tells me. "This is the tip of the iceberg. Give me 20 years and then see what we will accomplish."

Donaldson's company is in the process of building out three sprawling content and production hubs in his hometown of Greenville, North Carolina, a small city dotted by strip malls, office parks, and the campus of Eastern Carolina University. Donaldson hopes to position Greenville as a magnet for content creators in digital media. "The biggest parallel I could draw is to Tyler Perry in Atlanta," says MrBeast LLC president Marc Hustvedt, who splits his time between Greenville and Los Angeles. "Jimmy's creating his own studio system here."

In some respects, Donaldson is an unlikely frontman for a multimillion-dollar media empire. A self-described introvert, he often reiterates his discomfort with casual conversation. In our very first interaction, he ambled up to me in the driveway of his sprawling, 60,000-square-foot studio and said, by way of introduction, "So, we're going to start talking now?"

Even those who know Donaldson well are surprised he's opted for a life in front of the camera. "If you ask anybody that knew Jimmy before, they'd be like, 'Really? Jimmy got famous?' " says Tyson, his longtime best friend. "He was always really quiet. But it wasn't like he didn't want to talk to people. Jimmy just likes to talk about what he likes to talk about" – mostly, gaming or YouTube – "and if no one's talking about that, he doesn't like to talk."

But in truth, the main character of MrBeast's channel is not actually MrBeast himself. It is cold, hard cash. Money – piles, sheaves, gobs of it – takes center stage in nearly all of his videos, proffered as a balm for all of the world's problems to the gig-economy scrappers and hard-working single moms who star in his videos. In one, he tips a waitress at a hot-dog joint $10,000 for two glasses of water; in another, he gives more than $100,000 to people who lost their jobs in the pandemic. Much of the appeal of MrBeast is predicated on an updated version of the Horatio Alger story; the idea that with a little bit of luck, you too could one day run into MrBeast on the street and walk away thousands of dollars richer.

Of course, this type of giving is something of a Band-Aid on a brain tumor. It may get attention, but it ignores long-standing structural inequities and cyclical poverty. Over lunch at a Mexican restaurant with Donaldson and two of the boys – Jacobs and Tareq Salameh, a former aspiring comic turned cameraman who's been promoted to the cast – I comment that their videos all seem to ride on the idea that a fat check or a wad of cash stuffed in a fist can cure all manner of ills.

"It kinda can," says Salameh.

Donaldson nods: "If you have a trillion dollars, you don't really have any problems."

DONALDSON MODELS himself after his heroes, the entrepreneurs Steve Jobs and Elon Musk, portraits of whom adorn Donaldson's otherwise nondescript office and the living room of his house (including one of Musk, procured on Amazon, dressed as Napoleon Bonaparte). "I don't support or look up to everything he does or how

he treats people," Donaldson says of Musk, perhaps alluding to the fact that the Tesla and SpaceX founder famously tweeted and then deleted a Hitler meme the week before my arrival. "But I think it's inspiring that he's weaning the world off of oil and rebuilding imagination when it comes to space exploration and stuff like that."

Donaldson claims not to have any vivid memories of his childhood before the age of 11. He chalks this up in part to his entrepreneurial streak. "I'm very forward-thinking," he says. "Fuck the past. It's already happened. I'm trying to conquer the future." Indeed, he seems to have been born without any semblance of a nostalgia gene: Though his mother has a giant warehouse where she preserves every single memento from his old videos, he's never gone to see it.

That lack of nostalgia may also serve as a protective measure, because Donaldson's upbringing appears to have been less than stable. He was born in Kansas, the middle child to two parents who were active duty in the military, with his mother, Sue, serving as a prison warden in Mannheim, Germany, before being stationed at Fort Leavenworth. "Jimmy thinks it's pretty badass that his mom ran a prison," says Sue, a soft-spoken woman with a moderately-sized bouffant of carrot-colored hair. She now works as MrBeast LLC's chief compliance officer, overseeing the company's expenditures and contracts while managing her son's personal affairs, such as his banking. (She even chose the house where he lives, which is 10 houses down from hers.)

Sue worked 12-hour days while she was on active duty, and much of the child care was outsourced to a revolving cast of au pairs.

"IF YOU ASK ANYBODY THAT KNEW JIMMY BEFORE, THEY'D BE LIKE, 'REALLY? JIMMY GOT FAMOUS?' HE WAS ALWAYS REAL QUIET."

She attributes Jimmy's introversion largely to the fact that they moved so frequently. "We lived in three different locations in the southern U.S. before he was seven," she says. "There were no cousins, no aunts, no uncles. It was really just us." After a tumultuous marriage, his parents split up in 2007, when Donaldson was eight, and he no longer has any contact with his father. He declined to discuss the reasons why on the record. "I just tried my hardest to keep everything moving forward as best as possible," Sue says of the divorce. "We got through it the best that we could get through it."

Donaldson attended a small private school, Greenville Christian Academy, where boys were given demerits for wearing their hair too long and forced to copy Bible verses as punishment. He says he used to be observant – "You have it beat into your head every day" – but long questioned the church's stance on issues like homosexuality, and has since pivoted to identifying as agnostic. "It's such a sensitive topic for so many people around here," he says. "I believe there is a God, but there are so many different religions and so many people who believe passionately about these things. It's hard to know which [religion] is right."

Growing up, Donaldson had few friends, rarely going out with other kids on the weekends. Sue identified a deep competitive streak in him early on. "You couldn't throw a game with him. You always had to play it all the way through," she says. "Like with Monopoly. We wanted to throw it out after a while, because he was like, 'Don't even pretend to give me Boardwalk and Park.' "

The one word that those in Donaldson's orbit use to describe him is "obsessive"; he has a tendency to fixate on one thing at the expense of all other subjects. His single-minded focus on YouTube, he says, led kids at school to refer to him as autistic. "There's a five-year point in my life where I was just relentlessly, unhealthily obsessed with studying virality, studying the YouTube algorithm," he says. "I woke up. I would Uber Eats food. And then I would sit on my computer all day just studying shit nonstop with [other YouTubers]." (There was also a Settlers of Catan phase that's led to Donaldson's assistant buying at least five copies of the strategy game a month so there would always be "fresh ones" lying around.)

Donaldson admits that his focus on his work has made it difficult for him to maintain personal relationships. "I'm not really good at keeping friends," he says. "All my friends revolve around work." He also spends little time with his family, including the older brother who lives nearby, another YouTuber Donaldson describes as being somewhat like him but "less successful." (It doesn't help that his brother's channel is called "MrBro," a decision Donaldson says his brother now regrets.)

Though Donaldson enjoyed playing baseball as a child, a diagnosis of Crohn's disease, an autoimmune disorder characterized by intestinal distress, his sophomore year of high school caused him to drop out of sports. (He is currently on the drug Remicade to manage his symptoms, along with meals prepared by a private chef, though he often has flare-ups.) The stress of having to deal with his Crohn's, Sue says, led Donaldson to spend more time indoors, prompting his pivot to YouTube.

In truth, Donaldson had already established a presence on the platform, uploading videos of himself playing *Minecraft* and *Call of Duty* when he was 11. When he was 13, he started a new channel, adopting the handle "MrBeast6000" because "Mr. Beast" was already taken. At first, it appears that Donaldson was trying to find his voice, capitalizing on various YouTube trends to see what stuck: He tried video-game commentary, à la PewDiePie, then made videos estimating how much various YouTubers made.

Slowly, however, he started to rack up subscribers and eke out revenue, in part by engaging in increasingly extreme stunts. In one video, Tyson wraps him in 100 layers of toilet paper and Saran wrap; in another, Donaldson counts to 100,000, an idea he says he got from seeing if he could try to monetize watching multiple episodes of the anime *Naruto* in one sitting. In a video he published in 2015 addressed to a future him, he said, "I hope you have at least 100k subs." In May 2017, he would hit a million subscribers.

Sue had no idea he was making YouTube videos, and was stunned when she found out through an entry in his yearbook. "I was a normal parent," she says. "I was very concerned at what was out there." When Donaldson made it clear to her

Cash rules everything around MrBeast, on set in North Carolina.

TOP AND SHORTS BY BUCK MASON

PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHIAS CLAMER

that he was making money off his channel, however, her anxiety was reduced. Still, she was insistent that Jimmy go to college and get a degree after graduation. Donaldson acquiesced, enrolling in community college, though he says he did not attend a single class and dropped out midway through the first semester.

With that, Sue kicked her son out of the house, prompting him to move into a duplex with Tyson. It was perfect timing: Donaldson had just reached 750,000 subscribers and gotten his first brand deal. Rather than spend it, he reinvested the cash into a video where he gave a homeless person a $10,000 check.

It was not Donaldson's first video in which he gave away cash for free, but he saw that this brand of stunt philanthropy resonated. He shifted to more give-away-centric videos, such as "Tipping Waitresses With Real Gold Bars" (53 million views), and soon, he was earning $100,000 a month from his channel. "One day he came in with a check and was like, 'Mom, look how much I just made,'" says Sue. "And it was my entire year's salary." She retired and joined the company shortly thereafter.

"THERE'S A FIVE-YEAR PERIOD IN MY LIFE WHERE I WAS JUST RELENTLESSLY, UNHEALTHILY OBSESSED WITH STUDYING VIRALITY."

DONALDSON SAYS he doesn't "give a fuck about money," and plans to give it all away before he dies. "I don't want to live my life chasing the next shiny object to the next shiny object," he says as we drive around in his Tesla Model X. "It's a sad, miserable way to go about life." His assistant, a model-handsome Utah transplant named Steele, says that prior to his hiring, and Donaldson's ex-girlfriend redesigning his kitchen, YouTube's biggest star had lawn chairs in his living room and mattresses on the floor. "I don't give a shit about looks," Donaldson says. "I just care about functionality." Yet he also seems to be fixated on how much some shiny objects cost, pointing out that his custom-built, double-sided refrigerator – which he had made so his chef could deliver meals from outside without disturbing him – was 50 grand to install.

His reputation for being cash-rich also comes with security concerns. His apartment was broken into three or four years ago while he was filming, prompting him to move to a gated community and into a house with bulletproof windows and triple-steel-reinforced doors. A bodyguard accompanies him whenever he ventures out in public in Greenville. These concerns do not seem unfounded: During our lunch at the Mexican restaurant, two teenagers wait outside in the parking lot for hours, and tail Donaldson's car when we leave.

Donaldson acknowledges this is a problem of his own making. "I can create whatever world I want, do whatever I want for content, and I choose this," he says. "[In] the end, I have tons of influence. If I wanted to, I could have tons of money. Boohoo, people have expectations of me. I'll live."

Fundamentally, Donaldson seems to view money as a means to an end, a tool for him to accomplish his goal of dominating YouTube. "It doesn't matter to me," he says of the gold bars and Lamborghinis and stacks of cash in his warehouse. "But it matters to other people. And that's what allows us to get views so I make more money and do bigger stuff."

As Donaldson's subscriber count has ballooned, so too has the amount of money he spends on his videos. Today, many cost approximately a million dollars each to produce, few of which are profitable. The main channel is largely subsidized by Donaldson's "gaming" and "reacts" channels, which prominently feature the boys and are cost-efficient to produce, pulling in a great deal of revenue. "I could be doing cheaper videos," Donaldson says. "But I just don't want to. I want to push the boundaries to go bigger, bigger."

In late 2021, Donaldson's preternatural ability to hack YouTube garnered headlines across the world, when he spent nearly $4 million re-creating the Netflix series *Squid Game* – albeit without the extreme violence – awarding the winner a $456,000 prize following an intense game of musical chairs. The video went massively viral, racking up more than 225 million views.

But the *Squid Game* remake also garnered criticism from many who said it missed the point of the original series, which showed the brutal toll that free enterprise takes on middle-class people's lives. Donaldson dismisses the criticism. "The guy who made the show literally said, 'I like these people re-creating the show,'" he notes. (*Squid Game* creator Hwang Dong-Hyuk did say he approved of YouTubers re-creating the series, but did not comment on MrBeast's video specifically.)

It was not the first time Donaldson had encountered controversy. In 2018, *The Atlantic* reported that he had used anti-gay slurs in tweets he posted when he was a teenager, and had used homosexuality as a punchline in a number of his videos. At the time, he did not issue an apology, instead telling the magazine, "I'm not offensive in the slightest bit in anything I do. I'm just going to ignore it. I don't think anyone cares about this stuff." Today, he is more contrite.

"This is literally the heart of the Bible Belt," he says as we weave through the streets of Greenville. "I had it beat in my head every day when I was younger, like, 'Gay people are the reason God's going to come and burn this Earth.'" As a teenager, he said, he considered anti-gay rhetoric "normal" as a result. "As I grew up, I realized, 'Oh, this isn't normal. This is just a weird place I grew up in.' So, that type of thing, I [wish I could] go back in time and be like, 'Hey, stop.'"

Some in Donaldson's posse have also faced scrutiny for their language on social media, including Tyson, who was called out in April 2021 for having posted transphobic and homophobic memes on Twitter. Tyson deleted the tweets and issued an apology, telling me he considered the experience "an opportunity for learning and growth" and that the tweets stemmed from his own struggles with his sexuality; he came out as bisexual in the fall of 2020.

Donaldson is less reflective about a video he posted in 2016 that resurfaced last year, in which he appears to lampoon the concept of transgenderism by saying he sexually identifies as an attack helicopter and a tank, playing off of a meme that originated on Reddit and 4chan. He states in the now-deleted clip, "Is someone just sitting there and getting paid to think of gen-

ders?" Though the meme was a fairly well-known transphobic joke at the time, Donaldson denies being familiar with its origins. "I was just playing along with the meme like everyone else," he says, referring to the video as "a joke."

Donaldson has managed to deflect criticism in part because he aims to be staunchly apolitical, at least publicly. "I don't want to alienate Republicans and Democrats," he says. "I like having it where everyone can support [my] charity. My goal is to feed hundreds of millions of people. So it would be very silly of me to alienate basically half of America." (He recently appeared on Joe Rogan's podcast, which has attracted criticism for platforming Covid denialism and vaccine misinformation, though the episode steered clear of such topics.)

Perhaps the greatest threat to MrBeast's family-friendly brand was a 2021 investigation by *The New York Times* that quoted several former employees alleging that Donaldson had fostered a toxic work environment, screaming at workers, forcing them to work long hours, and calling them slurs. Two of the former MrBeast editors who spoke out against him, Nate Anderson and Matt Turner, deleted videos they'd posted about their experiences because of the harassment they got from MrBeast fans.

Donaldson denies the claims set forth in the *Times* story. "I've literally worked with over a thousand people. Two people thought I was pretty demanding, which was perfectly fine," he says. "We have high standards, but it's not a toxic work environment." He's said he gave Turner $10,000 and recommended him for a gig at a gaming company following the termination of his contract. (Turner, for his part, says the actual amount, his salary through the end of his contract, was smaller than that.)

Tyson frames the workplace conflicts as a function of Donaldson's difficulties communicating. "He knows what he wants, and I think he also has a very hard time socializing," he says. "We've talked about this – I think he has a hard time explaining to people what he wants and what he needs." But for Turner, those negative encounters made a lasting impression: "You see him on camera and you're like, 'He's such a cool dude.' Knowing him, you'd be like, 'Damn, I wish the cool Jimmy was the real Jimmy.' "

THE EARLY DAYS OF A BOY TURNED BEAST

Right: Donaldson (left) was into sports until a diagnosis of Crohn's disease led him to pivot to YouTube. Below: Donaldson, around age one, with mom Sue. As a child, she says, he was intensely competitive: "You couldn't throw a game with him. You had to play it all the way through."

DONALDSON'S BRAND as a budding philanthropist certainly helps render him Teflon. Over the past few years, he has pivoted away from attention-grabbing stunts on YouTube to more philanthropically minded videos. In addition to setting up MrBeast Philanthropy, where CEO Darren Margolias helms weekly food drives as well as clothing drives sourced from YouTuber merch, Donaldson went viral for launching #TeamTrees in partnership with the Arbor Day Foundation, and #TeamSeas.

While there is debate about whether planting 20 million trees will yield environmental impact, and skeptics suggest corporate donors could use such efforts as a form of greenwashing, Arbor Day Foundation CEO Dan Lambe says #TeamTrees sends an important message. "Planting 20 million trees is not going to solve the climate crisis," he acknowledges. "Having said that, drawing attention to the need for planting trees, and the benefits, is hugely valuable." Lambe confirms #TeamTrees has planted 14 million trees thus far, and is on track to hit its goal by the end of the year.

Donaldson did not grow up with much exposure to philanthropy. Sue says he never participated in volunteer activities or church community service, and he does not claim to have a deep emotional attachment to any of the causes he champions. Yet Margolias says Donaldson's earliest experiences giving money from brand deals to homeless people "ignited a fire" in him, leading him to want to harness his power and influence to change the world. By championing various philanthropic causes, Margolias says, Donaldson wants to school an entirely new generation (YouTube analytics doesn't track viewers below the age of 12, but his audience skews quite young, Donaldson says) in the benefits of unconditional giving. "So many people are conditioned to think giving money to charity is a burden or a sacrifice," says Margolias, an earnest, stocky gentleman in his early fifties. "But when people realize helping is enjoyable and beautiful, that will change the way they think about giving."

Margolias says that much of Donaldson's largesse occurs off camera, citing multiple examples where he spent tens of thousands of dollars on Christmas presents for children who lost family members in a hurricane, or renting a home and furnishing it for a family of nine whose parents had lost their jobs due to the pandemic. "Jimmy said to me the first night I met him, his life ambition is to improve the world. I have no shadow of a doubt that's sincere," he says. "Also to the people that say 'He does it for the views,' we have done some stunningly generous things Jimmy pays for 100 percent out of pocket that nobody knows about."

Donaldson is sensitive to any questions about his motivations. "I know myself, and I don't have anything to prove to anyone. I think what I've done speaks for itself," he says. "I have an entire channel built around my nonprofit that I've invested ungodly amounts of hours into building, that I'll never see a single penny out of.… I lose five figures and dozens of hours every month. The opportunity cost could go to projects that make millions of dollars. So I don't care. I don't say this stuff publicly, because that's not why I do it."

Donaldson says he hears from countless parents who tell him their children wanted to pick up trash at a beach or volunteer at a soup kitchen because of his videos. And many parents of MrBeast fans I spoke with said their children had pushed them to donate to #TeamSeas or #TeamTrees. Though when [*Cont. on 80*]

COURTESY OF MRBEAST, 2

WHY'S IT SO HARD FOR BLACK CREATORS TO GET THEIR DUE?

A year after the TikTok 'dance strike,' Black creators looking for credit and compensation face a complicated landscape

BY MOISES MENDEZ II

BY JUNE 2021, Erick Louis was tired of seeing fellow Black creators on TikTok getting ripped off. Viral dance videos helped songs like Doja Cat's "Say So" and Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" shoot up the pop charts, but the more those dances were copied, the less the people behind them were credited. Black creatives would share a dance, but it wouldn't become a trend until a white creator – Addison Rae and Charli D'Amelio being two big examples – with a bigger platform performed it.

Things came to a head when Megan Thee Stallion announced she was releasing a new song, "Thot Shit." Her songs "Savage" and "Captain Hook" had spawned viral dance crazes that were copied and mimicked thousands of times over – and Black creators were worried it would happen again.

So Louis made a video encapsulating what they were feeling: In the clip, he gets ready to dance, then abruptly sticks up two middle fingers as text pops up: "Sike! This app would be nothing without Black people." "My video just ended up being the one that somehow became the face of this 'dance strike,'" Louis says of that initial TikTok, which quickly amassed more than 500,000 views. "Those feelings – that tension, that anger, that frustration – already existed."

Nearly a year after the dance strike – in which a group of creators very openly refused to participate in viral dances – Black creators on TikTok still face challenges when it comes to getting their due. In response to the complaints, TikTok took a series of steps to show support for Black creators. This included a page titled "Crediting Creators," which outlined how to properly acknowledge originators of a trend, a TikTok for Black creators incubator program, an initiative to #SupportBlackBusinesses, and a partnership with MACRO to award $50,000 grants to 10 creators.

Vigilant TikTok users, meanwhile, have focused on adding "Dance Credit (DC)" or "Inspired By (IB)" in their video captions. But as Sydnee McRae, a content creator on TikTok, puts it, "It's never been a level playing field for Black and white creators. I don't really think [those changes are] gonna make a difference."

Part of the problem is there is no real recourse for those who want credit for their dances. Laws defining copyrighted material are complicated for Black creators: For starters, the law is broad when it comes to choreography. It's defined as a sequence of dance moves that are "an original work of authorship that's fixed in a tangible medium

CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT: BRANDONS EYE PHOTOGRAPHY; SUN MOON; TYLER HOGAN; COURTESY OF PABLO, THE MAN

of expression," explains Jeanne Fromer, a law professor at New York University. A dancer can't copyright just one movement; there has to be a series of moves that unfold throughout a routine to be considered copyrightable.

Even if a dance creator does receive a copyright, their power is limited. Are they going to sue people who don't credit them in their captions? Though several choreographers – including Keara Wilson, who started the "Savage" challenge – were able to copyright their dances, that was largely symbolic. Christopher Sprigman, a law professor at NYU, says it'd be difficult if Wilson, for example, wanted to sue people for copying the dance online without credit. But the copying itself might also give the dance its cachet. "What makes the dance important socially is that lots of people do it," he says.

Creators should think of themselves as businesses, says Shontavia Johnson, associate VP for entrepreneurship and innovation at Clemson University, and explore different avenues to make money, such as licensing dances for video games, dance classes, and selling the dance for a commercial. "So many people want to go viral – and I get wanting to go viral, and [wanting] the business opportunities that can come out of it," she tells ROLLING STONE. "But eyeballs don't often equal dollars."

Madhavi Sunder, professor of intellectual property at Georgetown Law, notes that this is much deeper than just digital dances – in fact, she says, appropriation is foundational to this type of law. "How we define property has often been premised on the theft of native lands and theft of Black labor – intellectual as well as physical labor – through enslavement," she explains. Copyright laws are "rife with biases about what counts as art. The Black TikTok strike seems to fundamentally be about distributive justice: Who gets the money?"

Louis, who made the viral TikTok of himself refusing to dance, says he's been booted from the app multiple times after speaking out. "I think I've built a presence online like I have a target on my back," he tells ROLLING STONE. Lately, Louis notes, he watches what he says. (TikTok says it "unequivocally does not moderate content or censor accounts on the basis of race.")

Now, creators who might have used TikTok to show off a new piece of choreography are thinking twice. Jaylin Hawkins, a cultural and music critic who goes by Pablo the Don on TikTok, says they haven't seen a new viral dance trend organically take over the app in quite some time. (This March, for example, the only dance trend that seemed even mildly popular was the choreography to *High School Musical*'s "A Night to Remember.") TikTok recently tweaked its algorithm, with a goal of diversifying the types of clips that show up on For You pages. Hawkins believes this is moving people away from dance content. "They want to be the short-form version of YouTube," Hawkins says.

Fannita Leggett, a creator with more than a million followers on TikTok, seconds Hawkins' implication that the app is moving toward content with "sustenance." She says this is why creators are diversifying their content and trying new things – like the rise in "Get Ready With Me" videos, fashion, and comedy videos. Dancing on the app, meanwhile, has lost its allure for her. "Everybody and their mama can do these dances," Leggett tells ROLLING STONE. "It's just not exciting to watch any more."

Keara Wilson started the "Savage" challenge and was able to copyright one of her dances.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: KARWAI TANG/WIREIMAGE; QUEEN.KEKEEEE/INSTAGRAM; JADE DEROSE

CREATORS ON CREATORS

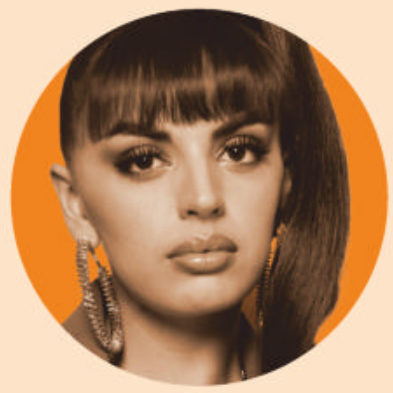
NANDI BUSHELL

@nandi_bushell

DAY JOB This 12-year-old multi-instrumentalist's viral drum video got her jam sessions with Roger Taylor and Dave Grohl.

MOST INSPIRING CREATOR "Bassist Davie504 says, 'Checkmate!' when he wins a battle. I used that in my 'Everlong' drum battle [with Grohl]."

FAVORITE NONMUSICIAN ACCOUNTS "Rayssa Leal, a 14-year-old skateboarder who won the silver in Olympic street skating for Brazil."



REBECCA BLACK

@msrebeccablack

DAY JOB The one-time "Friday" singer has become a LGBTQ+ icon, is on tour in Europe, and has a new album later this year.

FAVORITE CREATOR "I love Francis [Bourgeois], who does all the train content. One of my favorite things is the people who are there for a pure sense of joy. That makes my day."

IDEA I WISH I HAD "People who find these insane [things] celebrities said 10 years ago. What they find is so special."

THE CREATORS ISSUE

MEET SOCIAL MEDIA'S NEXT WAVE

CLASS OF 2022

Six young creators who go beyond 'influencing' to bring knowledge, humor, compassion, and perspective to our world

What makes a creator successful? Maybe it's their comic timing, the ability to side-eye the camera in selfie mode to match up with the perfect audio cue. Maybe it's the speed at which they hop on the latest trend, taking it from underground moment to viral movement, or the way that they open up to their followers, sharing their lives. Whatever it is, these creators have got it.

Meet the Class of 2022, picked by *Rolling Stone* for their proficiency with the form. Whether they're spreading their passion, documenting their life, educating their followers, or lip-syncing to a hot new sound, these creators stand out for their ability to connect with an audience and push our whole culture forward.

Mamadou Ndiaye

AGE 24 **HOMETOWN** Jersey City, New Jersey **TOTAL FOLLOWERS*** 14.5 million **GENRE** Animal Kingdom Explainer Comedy

An animal lover since childhood, Mamadou Ndiaye racks up millions of views on his TikTok videos with scroll-stopping titles like "Top 5 Disrespectful Animals," "Animals That Are Down Bad," and "Why Koalas Are the Absolute Worst." (The marsupial, which he calls a "degenerate" in the video, makes a sound like "Satan's doorbell," and has "the IQ of a cereal box," he says.) The clips have a low-fi vibe, with Ndiaye holding an absurdly small microphone as he deadpans factoids in front of a green screen. "I try to educate and make people laugh, the way I would've liked to learn as a kid," he says.

A 2019 graduate of Rutgers University, Ndiaye was just starting a career in environmental engineering when the Covid-19 pandemic hit. Now, he earns a living making videos of animal facts with funny commentary on social media. As he's become more established in the animaltok community, users have begun tagging him in videos of creatures they want him to explain, like a water snake covered in moss that he says looks like "something out of the Grinch's sex drawer." He researches his subjects, even if he's already familiar with the species from years of watching Animal Planet. "I always fact-check myself," he says, "because you don't wanna be wrong on the internet." —ANDREA MARKS

Santea

AGE 20 **HOMETOWN** Houston **TOTAL FOLLOWERS*** 3.8 million **GENRE** Silly Heartthrob Next Door

Santea was used to being "that skinny, funny kid" who everyone got along with in high school. And it's perhaps that same goofy energy that's made him resonate with Latino Gen Z'ers. That and the fact that the girls and gays think he's a cutie. "I've always thought I was more of a seven out of 10," he says with a laugh.

Raised by a maintenance worker and a housekeeper, Santea — real name Santiago Albarrán — got his start while on the clock at Home Depot, making funny dance clips in his orange work apron. By the time he was let go in May 2020, he was getting recognized as "the Home Depot boy."

With $2,000 in his bank account, Santea spent the next three months focusing on his newfound craft, and since then, he's become a Latino TikTok staple. "You don't usually see this regular Hispanic dude," he says. "You just see these kids that already have luxuries, drive these nice cars, and have that lifestyle." In his videos, he's sometimes in a colorful bob wig with his friends, known collectively as the Dad Wiggies. Other times he's leading skits about what it's like "hanging with your white friends." And more recently, he made a "paying labor workers to play soccer" vlog on YouTube, where he invited men waiting for gigs outside his old workplace to play soccer for cash. It's his way of paying it forward. —TOMÁS MIER

*Combined total of Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube followers

Leo González

AGE 27 **HOMETOWN** Hanford, California **TOTAL FOLLOWERS*** 2.4 million **GENRE** All-Too-Relatable Everyday Comedy

Leo González let his dream of being a comedian fade when he was in middle school. He opted instead to become a news reporter — but even then, things weren't working out for him as a production assistant at a local station in Reno, Nevada. It was around that time that González downloaded TikTok. "It was TikTok and that year in Reno that cracked me like an egg," he says.

González tapped into something he knew well: He made a video poking fun at that awkward lag when anchors are waiting to be connected with field reporters during local-news broadcasts, both often nodding in silence. The video resonated, and his follower count blasted from less than a dozen to more than 5,000 in a single day. "It forced me to dream again," he says.

González's videos are often simple, relatable skits in which he plays his character, Junior, in different scenarios — whether it be "people who make lactose intolerance a personality trait" or a friend asking a friend to be a fake résumé reference. The skits, nearly always in Spanglish, have led him to walk red carpets at Spanish awards shows, collaborate with one of his heroes, George Lopez, and most recently, interview Robert Pattinson on *The Batman*'s red carpet. "Now I can't even imagine not doing this," he says. "It's a lot of healing for a little Leo inside." —T.M.

Drew Afualo

AGE 26 **HOMETOWN** Riverside County, California **TOTAL FOLLOWERS*** 7.46 million **GENRE** Anti-Misogynistic Takedowns

"Women have constantly been expected to be the bigger person — to give patience, kindness, and grace to men in the face of disrespect," says Drew Afualo, a sports journalist turned anti-misogyny influencer. "I just don't do that." If TikTok is Gotham City, then Afualo is its very own sexism-fighting Batman, letting out her signature giggle like a bat signal on millions of For You pages. "Men have been unchecked for hundreds of thousands of fucking years," she says in one clip. "And now, there's a new sheriff in town, bitch."

When Afualo left her position at the NFL, and was freed from the restraints of corporate pleasantries, she decided to speak her mind. "I couldn't openly express how I feel when I'm having to deal with misogyny or racism," she says.

Afualo's trademark has become finding clips of men saying shitty things about women, then stitching them with eviscerating responses. "I'm a woman of color; I'm also not a thin woman. All these different facets of bigotry play into the way people react negatively to my content," Afualo says.

But millions of others — predominantly women and LGBTQ+ people — have the opposite response. "'You say everything that I wish I could say,'" she says they tell her. "'You put it into words in a way that I wish I could.'" —LARISHA PAUL

Rynn Star

AGE 29 **HOMETOWN** Charlotte, North Carolina **TOTAL FOLLOWERS*** 991,000 **GENRE** Anti-Racist Education

When Black Lives Matter protests broke out in summer 2020, Rynn Star (real name Erynn Chambers) wanted to add to the discourse. Then an elementary school music teacher, Star wrote the song "Black Neighborhoods Are Overpoliced," a simple ditty that concisely explained the criminal-justice atrocities that inspired the movement.

When they uploaded it on TikTok, it quickly went viral. Now, Star uses their platform to discuss topics like why highway systems are inherently racist or calling out J.K. Rowling's use of happy elf "slaves" in Harry Potter.

Star has leaned into the role of educator in a space that is notoriously toxic. "I'm generally pretty approachable," Star says. "As long as people come respectfully, I provide a space for people to learn and to grow. I hope people can understand that there's a big world out there. It's important to go outside of your bubble."

Star has three podcasts — *Hot Tea Hot Takes*, *Close Encounters of the Blerd Kind*, and *The Wordy & Nerdy Show* — that they hope will be a more substantial form of content creating than on TikTok. "Talking about heavy issues can get tiring sometimes," they say. "Nobody wants to sit around and have to keep insisting that people who look like you deserve human rights. After a while you just wanna talk about something else." —ANNA CONKLING

Miguel Peña

AGE 20 **HOMETOWN** Sarasota, Florida **TOTAL FOLLOWERS*** 3.1 million **GENRE** Honest Trans Journey

Miguel Peña was already gaining a following when he posted a TikTok last summer. In it, he didn't exactly come out as trans, but signaled a change was coming. "I never posted a video like, 'Hey, guys, so I'm coming out,'" he says. "It was more like, 'Hey, does anybody ever feel like you're not a girl?'" A week later, he cut his hair, and in November, he told followers he was changing his name and his pronouns. Since then, his feed has become a forum to document his transition.

When Peña started posting these clips, he got DMs asking for more information. So, like the queer YouTubers who "raised" him, he started making more educational content. "I have videos on bottom growth. I have videos about the process to get top surgery," he says. "I might not be able to get to every person, but at least I know that the videos are out there."

Before last summer, Peña — who grew up between Florida and Venezuela — was going through a "hyper-feminization" phase. "I wanted to be like the spicy Latina," he says. He still sometimes stitches these videos, reacting to his former "girly-girl" self. "I do get dysphoric [watching them]," he says. "[But] I don't want to ever feel like I have to erase or hide who I was before. Her posting those videos is what got me to where I am now." —ELISABETH GARBER-PAUL

THIS SPREAD FROM LEFT: AHMED GHONEIM; ALBERTO E. RODRIGUEZ/GETTY IMAGES; NOLWEN CIFUENTES; COURTESY OF DREW AFUALO; COURTESY OF ERYNN CHAMBERS; COURTESY OF MIGUEL PEÑA

THE SCUBA SLEUTHS OF YOUTUBE

THE CREATORS ISSUE

What started as treasure hunting turned into an obsession with solving cold cases, one submerged car at a time

BY ANDREA MARKS

"We're not going to have a problem" extracting this car, says Jeremy Sides at the beginning of five hours of work.

IT'S A RAW February morning in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and YouTuber Jeremy Sides is preparing to extract a Honda CVCC hatchback from Melton Hill Lake. He's here with fellow video creator Adam Brown, who will soon gear up in his scuba suit. "We should have no issues, it's not that heavy of a vehicle," Brown says, holding his camera in selfie mode. "We're not going to have a problem with the car, we're gonna have a problem with the conditions," Sides quips, eyeing the water. "There's no visibility. It looks like chocolate skim milk."

They measure out rope and tie it to an orange buoy to mark the car. They inflate the sides of a 14-foot motorized raft and lay two metal seats across it, wedging a suitcase containing a sonar system into the bottom, and call a local towing company to let it know they'll need its help again. But the pair are not just good Samaritans, dredging leaching metal from a public waterway. Rather, Sides and Brown are members of a growing YouTube community that specializes in finding missing cars – and, sometimes, missing persons – underwater. Populated by gearheads who are drawn to solving puzzles using high-tech tools and machinery ("man toys," as Sides calls them), the community has found an untapped market: Not only are there thousands of missing-persons cases cataloged on databases like the Charley Project and NamUs, there's also an audience eager to watch.

The car they're working on this chilly day in Oak Ridge doesn't contain any remains, but other searches in the area have turned up missing persons. In late 2021, Sides recovered the bodies of Erin Foster and Jeremy Bechtel while searching waterways in nearby Sparta. The two teenagers had last been seen leaving Foster's home in 2000 in her 1988 Grand Am. In underwater footage that's been viewed 5.1 million times, Sides follows a rope to the bottom of the Calfkiller River. The boxy shape of a vehicle looms out of the murky greenness. The windows are rolled up and covered in brown vegetation. Sides swims to the back of the wreck and wipes off the license plate, reading its number through his breathing apparatus: "It's them."

Sides, 42, got his start on YouTube with a metal detector. He'd roam through parks or explore the ruins of Civil War-era buildings near his home in Acworth, Georgia, finding treasures like old coins, tools, and glass jars. He got scuba-certified and made the transition to water, where he started recovering everything from 19th-century dentures to antique bombs and urns. "Urns are tough," he says. "There was one urn that had a hole in the bottom of it. I picked it up, not exactly knowing what I had, and dumped all the remains on myself. I was like, 'Oh God.' "

Sides went on his first missing-persons search in January 2021, with a group of divers from the YouTube channel Adventures With Purpose, based in Bend, Oregon. By that point, AWP had a pretty good track record: In May 2020, members of the channel, known for environmental cleanup, had unexpectedly stumbled upon the remains of Timothy Robinson. Until

ANDREA MARKS

AWP pulled his Mazda from the Willamette River during a livestream, Robinson, 56, had been missing since 2008. "We didn't know until we got the car up that there were human remains," says Doug Bishop, AWP's lead diver. They cut the stream and later uploaded an edited version. "His family figured that he went off to Europe. His brother just never knew what happened to him, and the entire time he was underwater right outside of Portland."

In January 2021, AWP invited other divers to join them in Nashville to search for Bill Simmons, 57, who had been missing for six months. That was when Sides learned to dredge out a car. He didn't find Simmons that day, but the team was successful later in the trip, and Sides was hooked on searching for missing persons. "It just felt like I'd like to have more of a reason behind what I'm doing instead of just entertainment value," says Sides. "It was like I could help out."

That approach resonates with viewers, too. Once AWP found Robinson, the channel changed. "Viewers started sending in cold cases of their friends or family members that are missing with a vehicle," Bishop says. Since 2020, AWP claims it has recovered the remains of 20 missing people.

When Sides pivoted from treasure hunting to searching for missing persons, he saw his views spike. In mid-2021, he gave up his day job as a mobile wheel repairman and went full-time into YouTube, supplementing his ad revenue with merchandise sales, donations, and paid subscriptions. When he found Foster and Bechtel in late 2021, he says his followers tripled. (He now has about 360,000.) His audience has changed, too. Whereas it was once fellow divers and treasure hunters, most people today come for updates or breakthroughs on cases. "The missing-persons community watching these videos are super supportive," he says.

Divers like Sides take their roles as amateur investigators seriously. If Sides finds a car belonging to a missing person, he says, he calls the authorities instead of a tow truck, and he gets out of their way when they arrive. "Police will take over, and we become spectators," he says. His interactions with law enforcement have been mainly positive so far, though according to other divers who spoke with Rolling Stone, encounters can be rocky. In one instance in 2020, AWP was waiting with the family of missing 17-year-old Nicholas Allen when the cops arrived to pull out the teen's car. The cops can be heard on the AWP video acting dismissively toward the family, saying there's "no guarantee" their child's body was in there. "No, but at least it's my car, and I asked you guys – I begged you guys to check," the mother says. Allen's body was recovered, and the sheriff's office later issued an apology for acting insensitively toward the family.

Steve DuBois, a retired cop who is now the executive director of Season of Justice, a nonprofit that helps solve cold cases, thinks YouTube scuba sleuths provide a valuable resource in missing-persons searches. "Some of my brothers and sisters in blue might disagree with me, but as long as the group is careful about [alerting law enforcement] once they make their discovery, and they receive permission to be on private land, I don't see a negative to it." If a scuba diver solves a missing-persons case, the way DuBois sees it, that's one less investigation police departments need to pay for.

Daylight is fading and freezing rain is falling on Melton Hill Lake as Sides and Brown talk with the tow-truck operators about making one last attempt. Despite their initial hopes that this would be an easy recovery, they've been at it for close to five hours. The car is hung up on a submerged stump. Sides looks exhausted, while Brown wants to make one more dive to attach a lift bag to the car, a huge balloon that should float it to the surface. "I don't wanna leave without a car," he shouts over the sound of the idling truck.

He and Sides haul a giant orange air bag, six feet across, onto the raft, and Sides ferries Brown out to the buoy. Brown swims down and connects the bag to the car, and Sides inflates it via a motorized pump. As Sides hauls Brown back to shore, the tow truck starts pulling. By now a crowd of about five cars has gathered to watch. Brown and Sides stand on the boat ramp, in reverence, each training their phone cameras on the advancing prize. Soon, the little yellow hatchback will be dragged ashore, water cascading from its gaping windows, zebra mussels coating its battered exterior as its rims grind across the concrete. But for now, it's sailing gracefully closer. Dustin Miles, the senior rigger for Quality Towing, has worked with Sides on four recent car recoveries and is as invested as the divers in its excavation. "As soon as we're hooked to it, we get heartbroken if we leave empty-handed," he says. "It's the thrill of seeing it crest up through the water and knowing you've got it."

FROM TOP: DAVID KATZINGER; VINCENT MUI

CREATORS ON CREATORS

JOE CASTLE BAKER

@joecastlebaker

DAY JOB This Instagram comedian known for solo sketches was in HBO Max's *Search Party*.

FAVORITE CREATOR: "Clare Ruddy is so weird, so funny. She's somebody I want to be friends with someday."

FAVORITE TIKTOK "It's this woman doing a viral challenge of how much soda she can drink. She has a high-pitched voice, and she's like, 'I can't do it, y'all!' And then she burps for maybe 45 seconds straight."

NOAH BECK

@noahbeck

DAY JOB A soccer pro and mega creator, he's set to make his acting debut in *The QB Bad Boy and Me,* from Creator+.

FAVORITE CREATOR "Trace's Oats immediately comes to mind. He makes healthy snacks, but they are delicious. I love following people that I [can] apply to my life."

MY 'FOR YOU' PAGE "It's a lot of zoo animals. I love a cute animal. When there's more than one interacting, it's adorable."

THE CREATORS ISSUE

BELLA POARCH VS. THE WORLD

From a painful childhood to military service to global pop stardom, the TikTok sensation keeps defying the odds

BY BRITTANY SPANOS

ILLUSTRATION BY EMAN CASALLOS

BELLA POARCH had a panic attack this morning. While pulling her glossy black hair into a high ponytail and doing her makeup for a 9 a.m. appointment, the nerves hit. She wasn't so sure she wanted to leave her home on the east side of Los Angeles, where she lives with her cat, PeePee, and French bulldog, PooPoo. Actually, she was sure she didn't. Yet here she is, sitting across the couch from me at a studio in Culver City, the 25-year-old Navy veteran turned mega-viral creator – her bouncy lip-sync to a line from Millie B's "M to the B (Soph Aspin Send)" from August 2020 is still the most popular TikTok of all time, with more than 56 million likes – turned budding pop star. While Poarch is a goth, combat-ready sexpot on her social pages and in music videos, in person she's shy. Her discomfort with her newfound fame is palpable. Still, as she has throughout her life, she pushed through the anxiety and the fear – "I was like, 'I got this,' " she says – to arrive right where she needed to be.

The transition from nobody to celebrity may be weirder for social media stars than anyone. One day you're playing ukulele to your phone camera alone in your bedroom (as Poarch used to do), the next you have millions of followers (in Poarch's case, 88.8 million to date). Still, creating is often a solitary business, one that doesn't require collaborators or autograph signings with screeching fans. It's only those who break as big as Poarch has over the past two years that find themselves suddenly thrust into a world of IRL interactions with strangers.

"It's very overwhelming when I meet new people," Poarch says, her girlish voice underscoring her shyness. "That's really what I struggle with right now."

She was just as timid when she first met her producer Sub Urban, a fellow Warner Records artist who'd blown up on TikTok. Though she says she "didn't talk at all" during that first session, Poarch worked through those nerves, too. Together, the pair made "Build a Bitch," her spooky-pop first single that would chart globally and top off at Number 56 on the *Billboard* Hot 100. In the 24 hours following its debut last May, it was the most-watched music video on YouTube, with 10 million views.

The success of "Build a Bitch" surprised many who'd seen Poarch merely as the cute lip-sync girl: It was confident, funny, dark, and weird. The video had blockbuster-movie-quality effects and featured cameos from content creators Bretman Rock and Mia Khalifa. But for every new fan Poarch won over, there were skeptics who didn't think she could be a real artist.

" 'Why are you making music? You only make faces,' " she says of the negative comments she saw online. "They were just hating because [of me] becoming famous on social media, then wanting to make music."

It hasn't deterred her: Poarch has been hard at work on her debut EP, due out this year, which will feature songs with Sub Urban as well as her new friend Grimes, who calls the TikToker "super-hardcore." In

a life that's taken her from a painful childhood to the military to global stardom, it's just another example of Poarch overcoming steep odds and upending every expectation.

TIKTOK IS full of theater kids, wannabe dancers, and oversharers, but when Poarch started creating on the app in the Covid summer of 2020, her content didn't fit any of those categories. In fact, it was confoundingly simple. Making heavy use of TikTok's Face Zoom feature, she created minimalist lip-sync videos full of cutesy, cartoonish facial expressions borrowed from video games and anime. (See the signature cross-eyed smirk that punctuates that "M to the B" hit.) She found comfort in embracing a character, something she'd learned to do as a form of escape throughout her life.

Born in the Philippines, Poarch was raised by her grandmother until she was three years old, when she was adopted by a white American veteran and his Filipino wife. She gained two sisters and a brother, all adopted too.

As she spoke about on the podcast *H3* last year, when Bella was seven, life on their family farm grew troubling. Poarch's father was tough on her and her brother, the youngest members of the family. They had to wake up at three or four in the morning to do chores, like cleaning up animal waste – a task her sisters were spared. Often, she said, they wouldn't be allowed to shower before school, leading classmates to bully them. If her work on the farm wasn't up to her father's standards, she alleged, he would deny her meals and sometimes hit her. Meanwhile, she claimed, her mother stayed silent.

Poarch joined the Navy at 17 and was deployed in Japan and Hawaii before she left the service at 23. "It helped me push myself," she says of the experience.

Poarch (at an L.A. museum gala in 2021), who taught herself to play pop songs like Coldplay's "Paradise" on the piano by ear, parlayed her meteoric TikTok fame into a music career, to the surprise of industry executives who'd dismissed her in early meetings. "They didn't really understand that I'm passionate with music," she says.

At school, Poarch found a way to express herself. While hiding it from her parents, she joined talent shows every month. And every month, she won. "I actually have 36 golden medals," she says proudly. Each of those wins came from a performance of Beyoncé's "Listen," a song written for the film *Dreamgirls*, where the character Deena exerts independence from her controlling husband. It's still Poarch's karaoke go-to.

When she was 13, Poarch, her brother, and her parents all moved to the United States, eventually settling in Fresno, California (her sisters stayed in the Philippines). While she's said her father's physical abuse subsided there, at 17, Poarch got away from him for good: She enrolled in the Navy, like her brother had done a few years prior. Oddly enough, she found freedom in Virginia, where she attended basic training. There was discipline and structure, but also days off where she could do fun things she'd been denied at home, like go to the mall and play around with makeup. "It changed a lot for me," she says. "I explored more about myself."

While in aviation school in Pensacola, Florida, Poarch got her first tattoo, a small heart. She's now covered in pieces, many of which she says have helped cover up the literal scars left behind from her childhood. But her favorite is a pair of wings that wrap around her back, with a ship in the middle, a tribute to her time as an aviation ordnance specialist.

"I was the smallest person in my workplace," Poarch says. "My job [was] picking up 80-pound, big machine guns and taking them to helicopters and doing maintenance on them. They would make fun of me: 'Oh, you're so tiny.' But it helped me push myself. It taught me that even if you're the smallest person, you can do whatever you want. You can get through a lot of things."

POST-DEPLOYMENT, Poarch settled down in Hawaii. In early 2020, she logged onto TikTok for the first time. By the time her "M to the B" video took off a few months later, Poarch had already signed with a management company that had been searching for promising nonwhite content creators. Poarch relocated to Los Angeles while in the throes of viral fame, and told her team she wanted to pursue music. At meetings with labels, many laughed in their faces, one of her managers, Aryan Mahyar, says. That is, until she showed them videos of her covering the low-fi artist Shiloh Dynasty on her ukulele. "That's what made them believe me," she says.

Once "Build a Bitch" was ready for the world, however, Poarch faced a new battle: She was just another creator trying to cross over with music, alongside names like Dixie D'Amelio, Addison Rae, and Bryce Hall – all of whom were struggling to find audiences outside of the app. "Everyone was hammering home that TikTokers had no talent," Mahyar says. But, true to form, Poarch was up for the challenge. "I think that encouraged Bella. She felt like it was an opportunity."

Two new songs she lets me hear prove she's taken that opportunity and run with it. They're Melanie Martinez-inspired, haunted doll-core, full of eerie tinkering noises that add an edge to her sweet, soft vocals. She describes her new music as "dark pop" in its sound, while the lyrics are meant to inspire people to fight for themselves. All of it stems from her own journey to self-love and acceptance.

"Looking at Beyoncé, she sang songs to uplift other people," Poarch says. "Now, that's what I want to do."

Her friend Grimes says Poarch's sound makes sense: "[Bella] is calm in the face of chaos. Despite being through some deeply fucked-up stuff, she's hyperfocused on optimism and making sure everyone wins."

The day after we meet, Poarch will jet off to Austin for Grimes' birthday bash. But mostly, pop's shyest new star finds comfort in singing, writing, and meditating at home. On weekends, her brother, now 28, comes up from San Diego, where he's still in the Navy. And she's rebuilt a relationship with her sisters, both of whom live in the Philippines and are in their early thirties. "We were young. I don't really blame them," Poarch says now.

As for her adoptive parents, Poarch last spoke to them a few years ago, mostly just to tell them how she felt. Her dad left her with a "good luck" and nothing else. "That's when I knew I didn't want to talk to them again. He didn't care." She says she blocked them both and seems OK with that.

Her sights are set on bigger things. Music is the priority, but she wants to be in movies, too – an action star or a Marvel superhero. Her next music video, which she filmed after a few weeks of combat training, could prove to be the perfect audition. Not that she has anyone else to impress. As she puts it: "I'm out here to prove myself right."

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF BELLA POARCH; STEFANIE KEENAN/GETTY IMAGES

DON'T LIKE THE VIP LIST? GO CRY ABOUT IT

As the VIP List, Meg Radice and Audrey Jongens became TikTok's most notorious aspirational food bloggers, but by leaning into their fake rich-girl image, they hit it big

BY EJ DICKSON

Meg Radice and Audrey Jongens make waves with ultra-aggro review TikToks.

COURTESY OF THE VIP LIST

'SOMETIMES YOU JUST gotta say fuck it and spend $125 on burrata," taunts the voice over a slo-mo cheese pull. It's a review of Saint Theo's, a trendy Manhattan restaurant, but the food is far less memorable than the narration: "Yes, this piece of cheese was more than my electric bill this month, and I *am* crying about it."

If you've been on TikTok this year, you've probably seen the VIP List, a.k.a. Meg Radice and Audrey Jongens. They've amassed nearly 400,000 followers with their hyper-aggro aspirational food content, which hit a chord with viewers, though not always in a positive way. Many accused them of running amok with Daddy's plastic, so the duo played up their fake rich-girl persona, posting tongue-in-cheek reviews of franchises like Olive Garden ("La Oliv-a Gardino") while continuing to cover exclusive spots, racking up brand deals with Bloomingdale's and GrubHub. Next up are custom VIP List experiences, expanding out of New York, and maybe – if things go well – reality TV.

How did you guys decide to corner the market on "bougie" food?

MEG RADICE: We've done pizza restaurants. We've done Papaya Dog. We've done McDonald's. But the nice restaurants always do better.

How did you find out you were being pretty thoroughly dragged on TikTok?

AUDREY JONGENS: The [videos] threatening our lives, that was probably a good indication.

RADICE: Our whole notification section was hate comments. And it's still happening. What are you gonna do?

JONGENS: It keeps the engagement up.

Why do you think people react to your content with such vitriol?

RADICE: What you see is 100 percent scripted. It's satire. We're not walking around New York calling people peasants. It's a joke. And it really triggers people. Also we're two women, and people really just love to tear women down who are doing well.

JONGENS: Especially when they see us eating in all of these nice places, they come to the comments section basically discrediting the fact that we could possibly be doing this without a man paying for our meals.

At what point were you just like, we're really gonna lean into this persona?

JONGENS: Someone made a parody video at [the East Village bistro] Lucien. We were getting all of this hate from that, so we were like, fuck it. We're getting so much engagement, we might as well just keep it going.

RADICE: The parody of us did so well. We were like, "What? This girl is getting so many views off being absurd? We should be absurd and get the views."

It seems like people are reacting more positively now.

RADICE: That's definitely true. People really have learned that we're in on the joke. It's honestly really nice to have somewhat of a positive comment section. We've been trying to let people know that it's all scripted and we're not mean in person.

How would you describe the characters you guys are playing?

RADICE: My character is Stefon from *SNL* crossed with Regina George. That is the aesthetic I go for.

THE CREATORS ISSUE

THE GUIDE TO BEING A HIMBO

TikTok ushered in a himbo renaissance, bringing self-aware hunks onto our phones — and into our hearts. We asked four how they felt about this newfound role, and how to join the movement

BY CADY DRELL

Farmer Will

AGE 22 **HOMETOWN** Aylesbury, England
TIKTOK FOLLOWERS 860,000

He's an English farmer who uses TikTok to show off his hard work. But does Will know what those shirtless videos of him dancing with lambs are doing to his followers? Well, yes.

Which videos get the thirstiest comments?
When my brother comes home he'll do slutty little dances. You get a fair few thirsty comments with that.

Do you feel like you encourage that or is it accidental?
I would say it's accidental! With my TikTok, the main aim for me is education — I want people to learn about the farm, learn about things that I do. And if I can do that in a fun, interactive way, then great.

How is it being called a "himbo"?
I'm a hard worker and really committed to the job, and it's nice being told you're a good-looking chap doing it. But also, I think everyone would be good-looking next to a lovely, cute animal, you know?

Sampson Gaglione

AGE 32 **HOMETOWN** Flathead Valley, Montana **TIKTOK FOLLOWERS** 172,000

A self-described "blue-collar guy," Gaglione acknowledges that his shirtless videos, in which he feigns disapproval at his openly thirsty followers over a soundtrack of moody covers, are probably just egging them on.

How did you start out on TikTok?
I made an account out of pure boredom. They weren't thirst traps, just goofy videos where I'd slurp coffee with funky sunglasses on. Then one day I made a video with no shirt on and gray sweatpants and it went pretty viral, and I thought, "Maybe I've found my niche."

What was the reaction like in the comments?
I couldn't believe how raunchy women were. It felt nice that people were going out of their way to say these disgusting things to me.

Is there one in particular that you think about a lot?
"Let's play Barbies. You be Ken, and I'll be the box you come in."

Luke Cook

AGE 35 **HOMETOWN** Los Angeles
TIKTOK FOLLOWERS 790,000

Cook may be an actor IRL (*Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, *Dollface*), but on TikTok, he's a zany Australian pop-culture critic, just trying to field the barrage of appreciative comments with grace and humility.

What does "himbo" mean to you?
If you mean an attractive, self-aware, self-deprecating guy who doesn't make those horrific thirst traps, then I'm happy to fall into that category.

People in your comments say pretty thirsty things to you.
Honestly, I encourage the creativity in it. If it's a beautiful mix of crass, disgusting, and creative, I'll pin it.

What kind of comment is the pinnacle of all of those things?
There's this one guy who once said, "You're the Lord of my Ring, daddy." Now, that is disgusting, but I love it. And on another, he writes, "Smuggling a porpoise in there" [*laughs*]. Like, my penis is the porpoise? Amazing.

Sam Vicchiollo

AGE 21 **HOMETOWN** Oshkosh, Wisconsin
TIKTOK FOLLOWERS 1.9 million

Vicchiollo, an early adopter of TikTok, insists he "didn't grow up as an attractive person." He now stands as a proud representative of himbokind.

How do you define "himbo"?
To understand himbo, you have to understand "bimbo" and how that paved the way. Bimbos are people who feel so comfortable in their sexiness, and their confidence, and they use it to their advantage. That's exactly what a himbo is.

So you recognize the good that can come from himboism?
Before TikTok, I was oblivious, but now I know what I do to people, and that's why I feel like I can make funny videos. The last thing you want to do is make people think you know that you're attractive. I never mention my attractiveness, but I know that if I post a video with my shirt off or I do a certain angle so my jawline looks better, that it will add to, I guess, the himboism.

FROM LEFT: THE GOLD STUDIOS; COURTESY OF SAMPSON GAGLIONE; BRANDON SOSA; GRACE AND COLIN

Benito Skinner has amassed more than a million followers on Instagram as Benny Drama.

NOT JUST BENNY DRAMA

Benito Skinner found his voice as Benny Drama. But the sketch comedian and celebrity impersonator — whose Kardashian take landed him a visit from Kris Jenner — is just getting started

BY EJ DICKSON

'SORRY FOR MY Buffalo Bill moment," says Benito Skinner. He's referring to the mannequin heads behind him: a pink-pastel number that would fit Bella Thorne's OnlyFans days; a brunette Jackie O complete with pillbox cap; and a Marilyn Monroe bouffant. But Skinner, 27, needs all the synthetic hair he can get. As Benny Drama, he's amassed more than a million Instagram followers, creating characters like the chain-smoking Throat Rippin' Annie and Kooper the Gen Z White House intern. He also tackles celebrity impressions, like the Kardashians, and considers it a sign of success that Kris Jenner and Kourtney appeared in a video with him. Next, he's in *Queer as Folk* and Billy Eichner's upcoming movie *Bros*. "It's exciting for me to take a character outside of the internet," he says. "To be in something that is, from my point of view, a very long sketch."

Who's your favorite celebrity to impersonate?

I think my favorite right now is Kris Jenner. I gave her a backstory of being in cahoots with the devil, which makes it fun to play. Lana [Del Rey] is my favorite, too. I'm obsessed with her. She's so fun because I love an Americana moment. I love doing the poetry. I love doing the overlined lips. I think she's fascinating and truly a gift.

Have you heard from her about your impression?

No, no. I find that musicians in general are just scarier to do because of their fan bases. They really take anything as a dig or to mean that you hate them. But I think the stan accounts know that I absolutely adore her. I'm a ride-or-die.

What was it like to meet Kris and Kourtney, after parodying them for so long?

They were so sweet. I completely disassociated. It was so strange to hear them talk in person. It was like, "What the fuck is going on?"

You did a pro-vaccine video with the Biden administration that got a lot of backlash. Did it dissuade you from making more political content?

I think it was a good moment for me to see that I've been in a cultural bubble, to know that there's still a huge population that believes these really disgusting and homophobic and transphobic things. So, no, there's a lot more I want to say, and I think I am looking for places outside of the internet to say those things because it can be taken so out of context.

Is there a celebrity that you're looking forward to parodying?

I'm very excited to do Julia Fox. I want her working at Urban Outfitters, showing the viewer how to make a crop top. [In Julia Fox voice] "Hey girl, what's up? Let me show you how to take this little wife-beater, sexy little tank, and we're just going to crop it." Something like that, with the cat-eye.

FROM TOP: TERRENCE O'CONNOR (SWEATER BY ERL); ROBYN BECK/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; BRITTANY TRAVIS

CREATORS ON CREATORS

LEXI RIVERA

@lexibrookerivera

DAY JOB YouTuber loved by tweens for hosting silly challenges with friends.

FAVORITE CREATOR "This probably sounds cheesy, but my brother Brent is my favorite. I get to see how much work he puts into this."

WHAT'S CHANGED "People [used to] perceive influencers a certain way, and I think now there's more respect for the work that goes into it. People are more welcoming of it."

KINGSLEY

@justkingtbh

DAY JOB This OG YouTuber stepped back from the content grind and is now studying to be a screenwriter.

MY COMFORT VIDEO "Don't judge me, but Christian Walker. He's a conservative dude who'll go on a [verbal] rampage then pull up to Starbucks. There's no way it's real! It's too much."

MY IG DISCOVER PAGE "It's a mix of buff guys, ethnic hair and hairstyles, *Drag Race*, drag queens, and food."

THE CRINGE MATRIX

A breakdown of the most awkward online trends

BY EJ DICKSON AND BRITTANY SPANOS

HORNY

Pickup artists

Dudes in sweatpants bragging about cunnilingus skills

Thirsting after hot fish in *Finding Nemo*

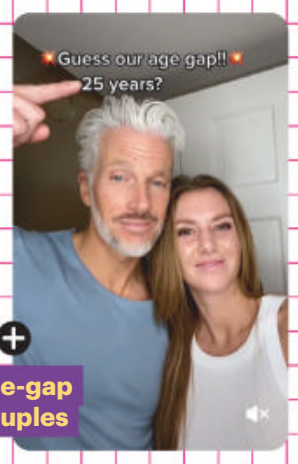
Drunk boomers dancing sexily to Shania Twain

Jason Derulo

CREEPY

Role-playing traumatic experiences

Men who put their RealDolls on their Hinge profiles



Age-gap couples

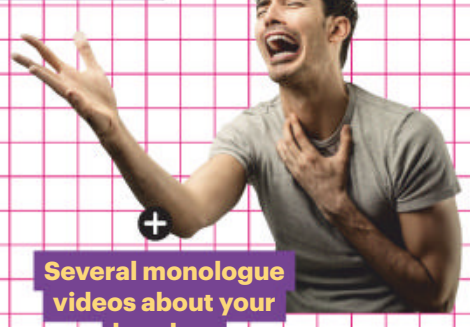
People who share hot photos of their parents

Poly couples oversharing

SWEET

Body-positive content made by skinny influencers

Several monologue videos about your breakup



Millennials rapping about how much they love their skinny jeans

Disney college cast-member videos

Theater kids pretending they don't know how to sing

Couples being sickeningly cute

"What I Eat in a Day" videos

Trader Joe's hacks set to musical-theater standards

Gen X stars using their Gen Z offspring to remain relevant

CHASTE

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: PHOTOS INDIA/GETTY IMAGES; PEOPLEIMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; PIXAR/EVERETT COLLECTION; ALEXANDER TAMARGO/GETTY IMAGES; DENISE TRUSCELLO/GETTY IMAGES; @EMRECALDERONE; ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES; @THEMICHAELJUSTIN; LILIGRAPHIE/ADOBESTOCK; IRINA EFREMOVA/STOCKSY; ADOBESTOCK; KATLEHO SEISA/GETTY IMAGES; PASCAL DELLA ZUANA/SYGMA/GETTY IMAGES; THE IMAGE BANK RF/GETTY IMAGES; PETRA STOCKHAUSEN/WESTEND61/GETTY IMAGES; VERONIKA IDIYAT/ADOBE STOCK; @32BARSHEF; @REESEWITHERSPOON

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HUNTER LEWIS GREW UP AN ADVENTURE-LOVING KID IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA. FOR TWO YEARS HE PLANNED AN ELABORATE OUTDOOR QUEST FOR FRIENDS AND FAMILY. AND THEN HE WENT MISSING

THE LAST TREASURE HUNT

BY STEPHEN RODRICK

LOST BOY
Hunter Lewis looks out over his "favorite place in the world," on the Northern California coast.

ET'S START at journey's end. Some adventures exact a terrible cost.

It's the last Sunday in January. More than 300 guests walk single file into the Arcata Community Center in far North California. Some wear blazers with sneakers, and some wear gingham dresses with muddy hiking boots. They patiently wait their turn and then sign their names into the guest book.

They are here to celebrate an extraordinary young man. His achievements are perfectly organized and displayed chronologically on a series of tables. There he is as a little boy with his father and grandfather preparing to launch a rocket into the Colorado sky. There are snapshots of a handsome kid with lank hair climbing on rocks, and another where he is playing his guitar. Then a pair of blue canvas shoes with sand still clinging to shredded soles.

You glance up and see someone who resembles the young man. It's his brother. He's a different kind of free spirit, with glasses and blond-green hair, his skinny body clad in Doc Martens, a Phish hoodie, and a Bikini Kill T-shirt. He stops for a moment and looks at the different stages of his brother's travels, and then moves on alone.

The tables continue. The boy grows up and his dreams get more ambitious. There is a ragged copy of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Then, a list of astronaut requirements scrawled in a teen's hand. One of the prerequisites is a private pilot license. Magically, the next table features the young man standing outside a plane. He got his license last fall.

Senior writer STEPHEN RODRICK *wrote about the fall of Kabul in the last issue.*

And then a treasure hunt. He was an old hand at them. He grew up solving his dad's hunts with his brother, both in Colorado and down in the caves and cliffs that dot the far Northern California coast, where they played as boys. But this one is different. The boy's treasure hunt is more elaborate, and it wants the competitors to step out of their comfort zone. There were riddles, keys, ciphers, and a map that, if plotted correctly, would lead you to the final treasure.

For five days, the young man watched with joy as his friends and family raced all over town, rappelling down cliffs and climbing trees in search of answers. Sometimes, the young man would drop in and film his friends as they searched, his all-encompassing laugh occasionally shaking the video. The treasure was his utopian version of life, adventures and risks that pushed everyone's limits, including his own.

But that is the last table. There is no photo of the man with the treasure-hunt winner. What comes next is not from an epic quest that ends with the knight winning the hand of the fair maiden. Don't misunderstand. The maiden is here, but she is sitting in the second row wearing a brave smile as her brother and parents wrap her in a group hug.

The reason for her sadness becomes clear once the visitors step beyond the table. On the floor are smashed pieces of green wood twisted in a way that suggests remnants left over from a home demolition. But they're not. They are the remains of a canoe.

On Dec. 30, Hunter Nathaniel Lewis paddled a lake canoe into the Pacific Ocean. He was maybe 100 yards from Trinidad Beach, a majestic stretch of coast where he and his brother climbed rocks and chased sea and sand as boys. At night, they huddled with their friends as a bonfire blazed near Grandmother's Rock, where, legend says, a Tsurai woman eternally waits for the sea to return her grandson.

Hunter was seen pushing off from shore around 11 a.m. It was a typical December day, the temperature in the high 40s, matching the cold of the ocean. Where Hunter was going wasn't clear to a local fisherman shoving off at about the same time. All he saw was a skinny boy in board shorts and a T-shirt, despite the chill, happily paddling without a care in the world.

And then he vanished. Now his smiling face was on a poster next to the word "MISSING."

Hunter was never found and is presumed dead. He was 21. There will be no more tables with tales of future adventures. Instead, there will be moving boxes holding memories of a life. Right now, there's just Hunter's mother sitting on a folding chair and weeping into her hands.

This is the story of how Hunter Lewis became the Lost Lewis treasure.

LAST CHRISTMAS MORNING, Hunter Lewis sat on his dad's couch in Blue Lake, California. He wore a T-shirt and pajamas and patiently waited as his two stepsisters opened their presents. He held hands with his girlfriend, Kinsley, an effervescent redhead he hoped to marry after they graduated from college in another year. Someday, Hunter promised, they would have redheaded kids that they would raise on Mars. He was certain he was going to be an astronaut. He watched the kids rip open gifts, and then would lean over and give Kinsley a passionate kiss that didn't surprise his family, since they had warned everyone that they were strong advocates of PDA.

Hunter handed everyone personalized envelopes once the presents were done. Simultaneously, he emailed the same letter to his mother, Micki, and brother, Bodie, a few miles away, as well as to a dozen friends home for Christmas.

His dad, Corey, opened his envelope and read.

Dear Mr. Lewis: It has come to our attention that you are of direct descent to the great lost Lewis bloodline. Long ago in your family history lies the fabled pirate legend the Lost Lewis, who was the last known person to hold the priceless Mayan artifact. Lewis shipwrecked somewhere along the north coast, leaving the artifact hidden by secrets known only to him and his relatives. It was believed he died before bearing children, but with recent findings we have found that information to be false. You, sir, are a descendant of that Lewis and are entitled to the legendary Lost Lewis treasure. Sign your name under the dotted line and send back with intent. The Lewis guild will update you on clues to the fabled Treasure. . . . Good luck, you will need it.

Included in the letter was a link to a Google Drive with the first round of clues. Corey looked at his son and grinned.

"This is going to be so much fun!"

TRUE ADVENTURE From left: Hunter dreamed of being an astronaut and got his pilot's license at 21; his Lost Lewis treasure map for the quest he planned for two years; with his girlfriend, Kinsley.

PREVIOUS PAGE AND THIS SPREAD: COURTESY OF THE LEWIS FAMILY, 4

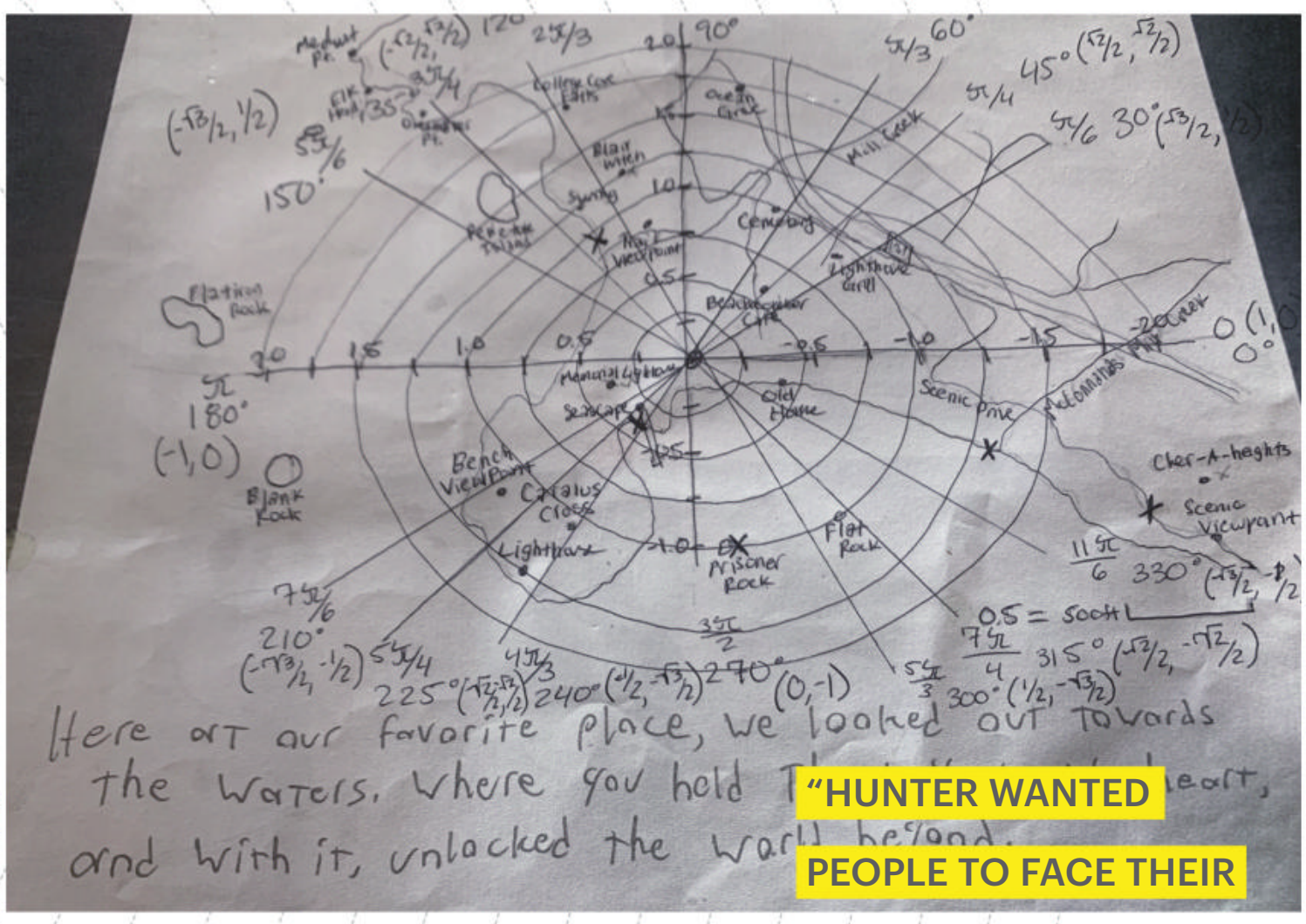
His son smiled back.

"I hope so; I've been working on it for two years."

THAT WAS a month ago. Today, Corey Lewis sits in his tae kwon do studio in nearby Arcata, about a 20-minute drive from the waters where his oldest son presumably drowned. Weak January sunlight filters into the space that doubled as Hunter and his brother Bodie's favorite place to play endless games of Dungeons & Dragons, with Hunter always serving as dungeon master. Corey is an accomplished martial-arts expert, a former tenured professor, and now a life coach and the author of a handful of self-help books. But right now he looks tired and spent. He grew old the moment he received the call. Still, Corey never grows tired of talking about his boy. He speaks of him in the present tense.

"I always say that Hunter is Corey 2.0." He smiles. "Like me but without the glitches." He pauses for a moment. "He was definitely kinder and braver than me."

Hunter was genetically destined to live like he was the star of his own action film. It was in his blood. Corey's grandfather was killed in a motorcycle accident when Corey's father was little. Corey's mother, Nancy, was a rodeo star back in Cheyenne, Wyoming, during the Sixties. She then married Lon Lewis, a veterinary nutritionist who did triathlons well into his seventies. They still drive every summer with their horses in a trailer from Topeka, Kansas, to their Colorado ranch 12 hours away. Corey met Micki, Hunter's mother, while he was working on the rugged Pacific Crest Trail. They moved in together in Reno, Nevada, where Corey was working on his Ph.D. in creative writing. They hiked and camped in the desert, going off the grid for days. Micki was always slightly more cautious than Corey, although that is a sliding scale in the Lewis family, as indicated by her swimming from Alcatraz to the San Francisco waterfront in her thirties, after Hunter was born. She loved Corey's daring side and tolerated the excesses, like the time he was arrested for wandering alone in an Atlanta subway tunnel after a buddy's kickboxing fight.



"HUNTER WANTED PEOPLE TO FACE THEIR FEARS AND BECOME THE PERSON HE KNEW THEY COULD BE," HIS FATHER, COREY, SAYS. "HE WAS DEFINITELY BRAVER THAN ME. ONE OF HIS FIRST WORDS WAS 'HIGHER.'"

"I couldn't really complain," Micki tells me. "That kind of behavior is what attracted me to him in the first place."

When Micki got pregnant in 1999, the couple paused for a second, wondering how a baby would fit into their lifestyle. In the end, they just threw the baby they named Hunter into a sling and kept camping and climbing. Among his first words were "Higher, faster." Corey obliged and built Hunter a mini roller coaster in their driveway.

The following year, Corey was offered a professorship at Humboldt State University, and the family immediately fell in love with the area where giant redwoods mesh with jagged cliffs before conceding to wild beaches along the Pacific Ocean. The family embraced the hippie vibe of the unspoiled country and began their exploration on long weekend hikes.

Corey started reading *The Hobbit* to Hunter when he was five, his baby brother, Bodie, sleeping nearby in his crib. Corey's firstborn was always trying to escape the Lewis backyard, with his mom and dad screaming "Hunter!" Eventually, Hunter met a neighbor who remarked, "So this is the Hunter I've been hearing about so much."

In elementary school, Hunter became obsessed with the treasure-seeking boys in *The Goonies*. He would have fit in well with those fictional lost boys – he already had a reputation at school as a curious kid with a loud laugh that could erupt at any time.

When the boys got a little older, Corey took them to Humboldt State and started teaching them parkour, an athletic endeavor in which you jump from roof to roof or rock to rock, theoretically minimizing the risk by looking before

you leap, contemplating all the potential outcomes.

Corey taught wilderness safety to students at Humboldt and urged his boys to take risks but not be reckless. Sometimes it took, sometimes it did not.

There were occasional signposts of the dangers of living an interesting life. When Hunter was 10, Micki and Corey took the boys to Mexico to meet Corey's parents at a beach resort. Still a daredevil at 70, Corey's dad was body surfing when a rogue wave slammed his skull into the sand. His mother screamed, and Corey dragged his dad out of the water. He wasn't breathing.

The family had just lost Corey's brother to cancer. Corey was certain neither he nor his mother could survive another tragedy. A man on the beach started administering CPR, but according to Corey, his father didn't come back until he and Micki took over the chest compressions. "I think it was the visceral connection that a father and son have that brought him back," says Corey.

Hunter watched in silence, telling his scared little brother that everything would be OK. It was Dec. 31, 2009, 12 years before Hunter disappeared.

HUMBOLDT COUNTY is a loosey-goosey place that fitted the Lewis family well. It often reeks of weed, not because everyone is smoking it, but because the smell wafts out of the redwoods from large farms just a short drive from the coast. On a windy January day, Corey takes me for a drive along the coast and tells me about a man who once owed him $900 for life-coaching sessions. The man said he needed to collect it from a farmer who had bought some property from him and lived outside of town. He asked Corey to come along. Corey agreed, and after 45 minutes of driving, the two found themselves on a remote rural road where he and his friend were met by men on ATVs with rifles on their backs. They left with the money.

"That was not my scene," Corey tells me as he steers his Jeep down a windy road. "It's a little bit like the Wild West out here."

He then slows down to say hello to a haggard but healthy old man in a wet suit, with a surfboard under his arm. The old man tries to find the right words.

"I'm so sorry about Hunter. It is just…"

He trails off, and Corey looks at the man with kind eyes.

"I know, thank you."

We drive in silence for a minute before pulling into a beach parking lot. Corey laughs.

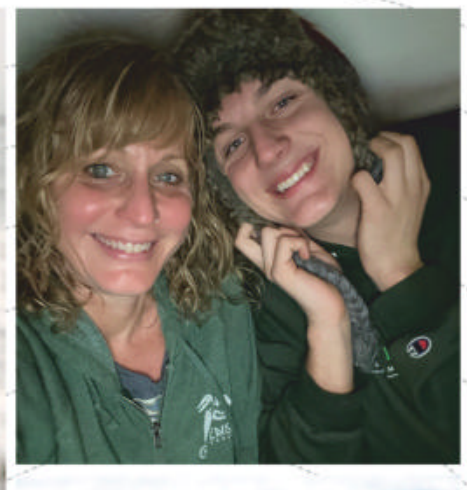
"That was the guy who owed me $900."

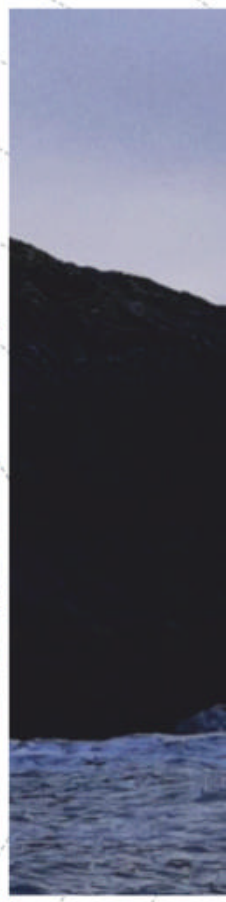
We are at Moonstone Beach, and Corey wants to show me where he held a treasure hunt for Hunter on his 10th birthday. It was shortly after Corey and Micki told the boys they were divorcing. On a particularly dark day, Corey wept in front of his boys, and then apologized for breaking down in front of them.

"That's OK, Dad," said Hunter. "Everybody has to cry."

Hunter remained a boy without guile or shame even after reaching adolescence. Micki would sometimes substitute-teach at his middle school, and he'd scream "Hi, Mommy" across the crowded halls.

"Whenever he was leaving the house, he'd circle back for a second hug and 'I love you,'" Corey tells me as we walk in the wind. "It never stopped until he was gone."





FINAL CLUE
From left: The family found the key Hunter made for the hunt; with his mom, Micki, and dad, Corey; the search-and-rescue mission.

Hunter wasn't stymied by typical kid problems. His best friend Zane was going to Canada with the school band and Hunter wanted to go, so he learned how to play percussion in six weeks. To him, life was just a riddle to be solved. Corey encouraged his curiosity, constructing clues and maps and leading his two boys on treasure hunts both on his parents' Colorado ranch and on the beaches of Humboldt County.

We step through wet sand, and I follow Corey as he dips his head and enters a cave. It is a dark and serene hole, and the ocean's thunder melts away. This was where Corey hid the treasure on Hunter's 10th birthday. We enjoy the respite from the elements, and Corey speaks quietly.

"I had a cigar box I'd had as a kid, and I used it as a treasure chest for the boys."

Hunter, Bodie, and his friends followed the clues. As usual, Hunter found the treasure that consisted of a few dollars and some chocolate gold coins. A few years later, Corey gave Hunter the box after another treasure hunt at his parents' Colorado place.

"He acted like the box was a treasure in itself."

We walk back toward the parking lot and briefly stop at a cliff that played a role in the treasure hunt. One of the clues led Hunter's friend Michael Santos here to retrieve a clue that was embedded into a crevice. Alas, Santos was afraid of heights and didn't want to rappel down and grab it. Hunter spent two hours cajoling his friend and taught him how to rappel and grab the clue.

"Hunter wanted people to face their fears and become the person he knew they could be," Corey says.

I wonder aloud how Hunter had hidden the clue by himself in the first place. Corey sighs.

"He probably came out here and did it by himself. Not the best idea."

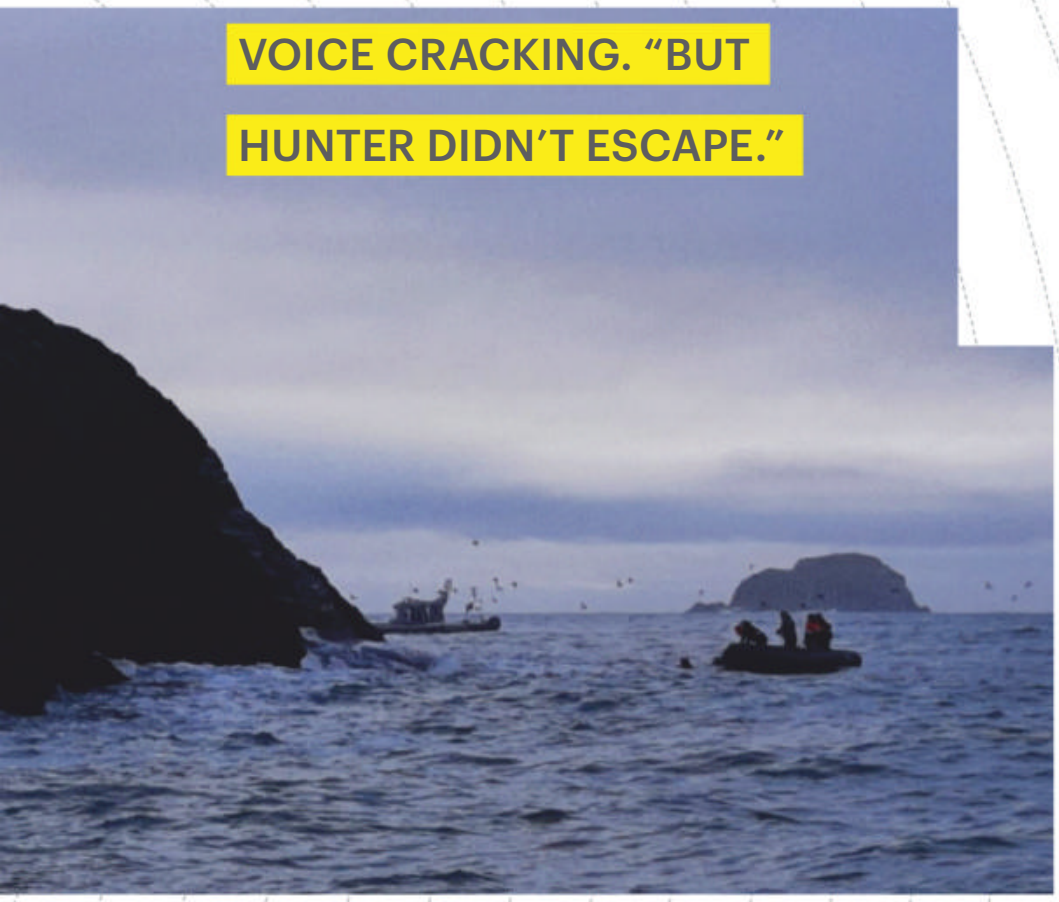
We drive back into town on the 101, shading our eyes from the setting sun flitting through the redwoods. Eventually, Corey mentions that only one other thing washed ashore besides the splinters of the canoe. It was the cigar box turned treasure chest.

NOTHING COULD STOP Hunter Lewis except for a pandemic. The beauty of California is it's so big that Hunter could decide to go to college 600 miles away and still qualify for in-state tuition. His boyhood dream of flying and going to space was no longer kid stuff. Cal State Long Beach had an excellent aerospace program and was geographically located in a city that was essential to America's space industry.

Hunter made friends before his parents had left his dorm parking lot. Home on Christmas break, he talked excitedly about how the Pacific Ocean was 30 degrees warmer in Long Beach than in Humboldt, and wasn't it weird that it was the same ocean? He began working on his father to let him start taking flying lessons, cagily suggesting a pilot license was one of the pre-

CLOCKWISE, FROM RIGHT: COURTESY OF MICKI VETRIE; COURTESY OF THE LEWIS FAMILY, 2

“HUNTER LOVED THESE STORIES OF AMAZING JOURNEYS WHERE EVERYONE IS A HERO AND MAKES A GREAT ESCAPE,” HIS MOM SAYS, HER VOICE CRACKING. “BUT HUNTER DIDN’T ESCAPE.”



FROM RIGHT: HUMBOLDT COUNTY SHERIFF’S OFFICE; COURTESY OF MICKI VETRIE

requisites for aspiring astronauts. Corey told Hunter he would look into it.

And then the plague came. By the spring of 2020, Hunter was back home in Humboldt taking classes remotely and living in the small cottage behind the house that Corey shares with his second wife, Jessica, and her two daughters. Hunter was slowly going bananas, cut off from his future and his new life. It was anathema to everything his father had taught him. “My dad has a saying where if you want to pursue something, don’t do it in the future, do it now,” Hunter told a classmate. “Now’s the time for everything.” To break up the monotony, he went camping in the California mountains with his friends Dakota and Zane, telling his dad that they would figure out how to put chains on his truck when they got there. They returned safely, but the trip only made him more restless.

In the fall, he and his parents decided he should go back to Long Beach, even though his classes would still be over Zoom. He moved into an apartment building and befriended a middle-aged gay man who he referred to as his “guncle.” The man taught Hunter that taking out his stinking garbage was a good thing, and that playing video games at 3 a.m. and laughing loudly above his bedroom was a bad thing.

And he flew. Corey had taken flying lessons and let Hunter tag along, but never got his license. Hunter was different; he felt more alive than he did jumping from rock to rock in the mountains. Once he got his license, he took a classmate, Nathan Tung, along on some flights. Tung shot a short documentary about him. “As soon as I step into the airplane everything else that has been going on in my day just leaves my mind,” says Hunter to the camera. “I’m not thinking about what I need to do tomorrow.”

Tung didn’t mention in his video that his door flew open after taking off and that Hunter gently admonished him to be more careful. Five minutes later, Hunter’s door flew open as well, and they both laughed.

That October, Hunter and a dozen other college students rented a big house outside Zion National Park in Utah. He knew most of the other kids, but not all of them. One of the strangers was Kinsley Rolph, a journalism student and hockey player at Chapman University in Orange County, about 20 miles from Long Beach. She first spotted Hunter paddleboarding near the house, and was immediately taken. She looked forward to watching him and some of the others play music. Before coming down for the show, Kinsley stepped into the bathroom that had been designated for the guys.

She didn’t come out for an hour. She had clogged the toilet and was too embarrassed to tell anyone. Hunter spotted her and asked why she had missed the band. Near tears, Kinsley confessed her sin. Hunter just laughed his big laugh and told her it was no big deal. He got a plunger and fixed the toilet.

After that, the two were rarely apart. On the second night of their trip, Kinsley froze on a climb, not out of fear – her hands were stiffening because she’d forgotten her thyroid medication. Helmetless, Hunter climbed up and helped her down. It wasn’t long before Kinsley was spending almost all of her nights at his apartment.

“The pandemic was terrible, but it let us spend 24 hours a day together,” Kinsley tells me in a park not far from Hunter’s Long Beach apartment. “We did our classes over Zoom, so we didn’t need to ever be apart.” Our conversation is occasionally interrupted by planes landing at Long Beach Airport. She looks up and smiles.

“Hunter loved to come here and watch the planes,” Kinsley says. “Once, he flew me home from a hockey game in Santa Barbara. I thought my coach would be mad because I didn’t take the team bus, but he was just ‘I’ve got to meet this guy.’ ”

Most nights they made dinner before retreating to bed, where their vigorous activities broke two bed frames. “After that, we decided to leave the bed on the floor,” says Kinsley. “But now I’m making a bookshelf from the broken parts.”

The two met each other’s families, hers in suburban Boston and his in Humboldt County. On one visit, Hunter took her on a tour of his favorite places, heading up on a deserted road above Trinidad Beach. He parked the car, and they hiked a few hundred yards holding hands until they emerged into a clearing. Kinsley’s jaw dropped. Suddenly, they were looking down on the Pacific Ocean, and he pointed out his favorite rocks and reefs. He sat down and looked out toward the horizon.

“This is my favorite place.”

He wasn’t exaggerating. He often came here to think and draw. Hunter had his senior-year photos taken there, but didn’t tell [*Cont. on 80*]

MOURNING A FRIEND
Hunter’s friends gather near where he went missing. He liked to tell his friends to seize the moment: “Now is the time for everything.”

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Reviews

Music

FLORENCE WELCH'S GOOD FIGHT

The latest Florence + the Machine LP is an ecstatic prayer for post-pandemic redemption

By JON DOLAN

Florence + the Machine

Dance Fever

POLYDOR

★★★½☆

WHEN FLORENCE + the Machine made their debut a little more than a decade ago, the U.K. music scene was awash in the retro-soul typified by Amy Winehouse and Adele. Florence Welch looked backward, too. But her influences were at once more ancient and more modern, marrying a goth melodrama that went back to the Brontës with a New Romantic exoticism that evoked Kate Bush, tied together by a secret-sharing intensity that's always made Welch feel like an eternal wild child, a feminist warrior, and a sisterly confidante.

On the band's fifth album, she's still chasing her own heroically errant muse down whichever mossy, forked →

ILLUSTRATION BY
Bill Mayer

FLORENCE + THE MACHINE

path it might take her: "I need my empty halls to echo with grand self-mythology," she sings on the opener, "King," adding " 'Cause I am no mother, I am no bride, I am king."

Dance Fever may be Welch's most ecstatically extra work yet. Just check "Free," a titanic synth-rock banger in which she describes how epiphanies twist her mind and body like uncontrollable shocks ("Sometimes I wonder if I should be medicated," she sings), or "Choreomania," a dervish rush of catharsis that takes its title from the impromptu mass "dancing plagues" that swept Europe during the Renaissance. "Heaven Is Here" is a blast of swinging Celtic-folk hedonism, and on "Daffodil," she sings about transcending generational torment with the "helpless optimism of spring."

Primary co-producers Jack Antonoff and Glass Animals' Dave Bayley helped Welch hone her pop instincts without hemming in her far-ranging impulses. She says the album was influenced by her desire to break free after the pandemic. Among the slower, sonically dreamy moments is "Back in Town," about a trip to New York after lockdown is over, and "Girls Against God," in which she sings, "If they ever let me out/I'm gonna really let it out," her pent-up desire leading to a roller-coaster meditation on memory, loss, rage, desire, and confliction.

Welch has always flung herself into sweeping gestures. "Have I learned restraint?" she asks knowingly at one point. Spoiler: not so much. For her, mythic moments are the only moments that matter; just check "Cassandra" and the album-closing "Morning Elvis." But her lyrical excesses can belie a musical nuance she's been accruing on albums like 2015's soul-steeped *How Big, How Blue, How Beautiful* and 2018's tastefully experimental *High As Hope*.

This album peaks with "My Love," which brings to mind Everything But the Girl's house-music interiority reengineered for a moonlit rave on the moors. Florence sings about a very mid-2020 sense of emptiness: "There is nothing to describe/Except the moon still bright against the worrying sky," adding "All my friends are getting ill." But she flips those bad vibes into her own disco-diva cri de coeur, demanding "Tell me where to put my love." No matter what raw deal the world gives her, this is not an artist who will be settling for less. ®

MIRANDA GOES HER OWN WAY

Country music's most ambitious artist keeps following her freewheeling spirit By JON FREEMAN

MIRANDA LAMBERT'S 2021 collaborative album *The Marfa Tapes,* with Jack Ingram and Jon Randall, was a stripped-down set that helped resituate the Texas-born Lambert in the tradition of Lone Star singer-songwriters like Guy Clark and Robert Earl Keen.

Miranda Lambert
Palomino
RCA Nashville
★★★★☆

It also further cemented the country star's reputation for stylistic risks – following 2019's more conventionally fantastic *Wildcard,* and released in the same year she dropped a tropical house remix of "Tequila Does."

Palomino, Lambert's eighth solo album, is full of departures too. Lambert and her collaborators (including co-producers Randall and Luke Dick) wrote a multi-hued batch of songs about movement and characters who drift from place to place – sometimes because they want to, sometimes because they have to.

"There's always been a stranger in my soul," Lambert sings on "Tourist," an easygoing account of meeting new faces and swapping stories but never settling for too long. Lead single "If I Was a Cowboy" adds some woozy, dreamlike sparkle to Lambert's ruminations on itinerant life. Even the fiery cover of Mick Jagger's solo cut "Wandering Spirit," featuring the McCrary Sisters, makes these travels sound like a higher calling.

There are numerous nods to classic rock throughout. Album opener "Actin' Up" has a spaced-out riff that recalls David Essex's "Rock On" before morphing into a ringing, Led Zeppelin-style chorus, while the haunting "Strange" sits somewhere between Nirvana and Neil Young.

Three of the songs from *Marfa Tapes* also show up fully dressed. "Waxahachie" has a deep ache in its jangle, "Geraldene" flirts with Seventies rock bombast, and "In His Arms" builds off an acoustic riff to include ghostly pedal steel and pinging guitar effects. It amplifies the original's sense of longing into something canyon-like.

Lambert's more adventurous side comes out on "I'll Be Loving You," which combines echoing piano notes and thick coils of electric guitar into a booming anthem that's more Arcade Fire than Alan Jackson. Meanwhile, the swampy riverboat jam "Music City Queen" gets funky and a self-consciously ridiculous assist from Fred Schneider, Cindy Wilson, and Kate Pierson of the B-52's.

The LP's final track, "Carousel," is a breathtaking ballad of trapeze-artist romance and long-buried secrets. "Every show must end, every circus leaves town," Lambert sings. It's a perfect summation of all the characters who show up on *Palomino* as well as a metaphor for her own restless ambition. ®

FROM TOP: ROBERT ASCROFT; JUAN MEDINA

BREAKING

The Rainbow Dembow of Kiko El Crazy

IT'S NOT JUST the electric-pink hair and outlandish stage presence that has made Kiko El Crazy one of the standout artists in the Dominican Republic's radical dembow scene. On *Llegó El Domi*, his debut for Latin-pop powerhouse label Rimas, there's plenty of the riotous dembow that made him a star on the island, but he goes wider and bigger with bursts of EDM-guarachero, electro-pop, reggaeton, and more. The opening track is built off traditional Dominican guitars that are meant to be unexpected — it's a striking way to kick off Kiko's bold introduction to the rest of the world. **JULYSSA LOPEZ**

★★★★★ Classic | ★★★★ Excellent | ★★★ Good | ★★ Fair | ★ Poor RATINGS ARE SUPERVISED BY THE EDITORS OF ROLLING STONE.

Quick Hits

Ten new albums you need to know about now

Wet Leg
Wet Leg
Domino

LEG UP Wet Leg are the most exciting new U.K. rock chancers in ages — post-punk guitars, hooky song chants, cheek for weeks. Their debut is full of sarcastic gems.

★★★★☆

Omar Apollo
Ivory
Warner

APOLLO RISING The Mexican American alt-R&B artist mixes aching lyricism about queer love and desire with fearless exploration of hip-hop, soul, and even ranchera sounds.

★★★★☆

Girlpool
Forgiveness
Anti-

DARK POWER The fourth album from the L.A. folk-turned-industrial-pop-duo Avery Tucker and Harmony Tividad is their most sonically surprising — full of brash lust and tender beauty.

★★★★☆

Black Keys
Dropout Boogie
Nonesuch

KEYED UP The arena-garage-rock duo channel their "inner ZZ Top" into some of the stickiest alt-boogie of their career, and even bring on ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons to help out.

★★★½☆

Sharon Van Etten
We've Been Going About This All Wrong
Jagjaguwar

MOODY MAJESTY Another collection of gorgeously moody singer-songwriter pop — see "Anything," in which a sleepless night becomes a devastating anthem about much more.

★★★½☆

Kurt Vile
Watch My Moves
Verve

GUITAR HEAVEN Laid-back guitar wizard Vile stretches out on his sweetest, loosey-goosiest series of jams yet, handing out 74 minutes of mellow wisdom off the dome.

★★★½☆

Bonnie Raitt
Just Like That
Redwing

TRUE BLUES The blues-rock icon's first LP in six years is as warm and soulful as ever. Raitt rocks out on "Living for the Ones" and closes with "Down the Hall," a moving reflection on mortality.

★★★½☆

Father John Misty
Chloë and the Next 20th Century
Sub Pop

MISTY SCHMISTY If Harry Nilsson had kept remaking *Nilsson Schmilsson* until about 1982, it would sound like the latest offering from FJM, our favorite Lounge Singer in Distress.

★★★½☆

Arcade Fire
We
Columbia

PALE FIRE The first AF album in five years has moments of dance-rock elation and heroic empathy, but can get a bit sleepy as they try to puzzle out our "age of anxiety."

★★★☆☆

Jack White
Fear of the Dawn
Third Man

OFF WHITE He can still deliver White Stripes-level riffs, but too often his guitar playing feels mechanical, and rarely here does it feel like he bothered to arrive at a complete musical thought.

★★½☆☆

CONTRIBUTORS: JONATHAN BERNSTEIN, JON DOLAN, KORY GROW, JOSEPH HUDAK, JULYSSA LOPEZ, ANGIE MARTOCCIO, ROB SHEFFIELD, SIMON VOZICK-LEVINSON

TOP, FROM LEFT: KEVIN WINTER/GETTY IMAGES; TIM MOSENFELDER/WIREIMAGE; MARC GRIMWADE/WIREIMAGE; GRIFFIN LOTZ; TIM MOSENFELDER/GETTY IMAGES

Boon (left) and Wallace are rock rebels reined in.

T.V.

THE PUNK REVOLUTION, TELEVISED

Danny Boyle's series about the rise of the Sex Pistols hits the right notes but doesn't make quite enough noise

Pistol

NETWORK	Hulu
AIR DATE	All episodes available May 31
STARRING	Toby Wallace Anson Boon Thomas Brodie-Sangster Sydney Chandler

★★★☆☆

ALAN SEPINWALL

EARLY IN this miniseries about the thrilling rise and ugly fall of seminal English punk act the Sex Pistols, the band hosts a party and grandiose manager Malcolm McLaren (Thomas Brodie-Sangster) proclaims to guitar player Steve Jones (Toby Wallace) that they are witnessing the birth of a new movement. A skeptical Jones, noting that the revelers are singing the innocuous 1974 pop hit "Shang-A-Lang," wonders if a rebellion can have a Bay City Rollers soundtrack.

This battle between revolution and convention is the central tension of *Pistol*. The Pistols channeled the rage they felt about being left behind in the wreckage of the British Empire to strip rock music down to its rebellious roots, and then built something new atop it. With all the stylistic flourishes you'd expect from director Danny Boyle, *Pistol* aspires to bring some of the same anarchy to the state of the prestige-TV drama. But it doesn't transcend its genre the way *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* did.

Adapting Jones' memoir, *Lonely Boy*, writer Craig Pearce positions him as the flawed but likable hero who held the Pistols together for a while despite the shit stirring of frontman Johnny Rotten (Anson Boon) and the self-destructive streak of bassist Sid Vicious (Louis Partridge). Wallace is a compelling leading man, but Jones feels like too traditional an entry point. (The real Johnny Rotten, a.k.a. John Lydon, has disavowed the project.)

There are moments that sing, like drummer Paul Cook (Jacob Slater) slowing the "Anarchy in the U.K." beat until it resembles the defiant anthem we know 45 years later. But versions of them exist in half the band biopics ever made. Even details drawn from real life – the former John Simon Ritchie gets the Sid Vicious nickname after Rotten's pet hamster Sid bites him – can play as corny here.

Thanks to Boyle, the clichéd nature of *Pistol* is disappointing but not crippling. Still, the show seems as overdone as the dinosaur bands the Pistols were rebelling against, with a story that moves at a leisurely pace for five hours and, at the end, races through the band's disastrous American tour and the tragic fates of Sid and girlfriend Nancy Spungen (Emma Appleton). It's as if Pearce and Boyle are reluctant to spend too much time revisiting the material covered in 1986's *Sid and Nancy*, a movie that had an unrelenting spirit that *Pistol* could use more of. The Sex Pistols were born of anger; *Pistol* is made with love. That's a tricky combination. ®

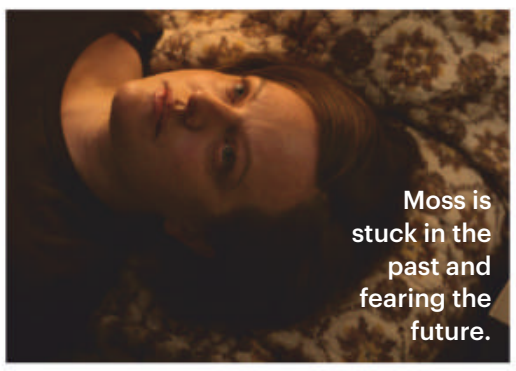
A KILLER PLAYING WITH TIME

Shining Girls

NETWORK	Apple TV+
AIR DATE	Fridays

★★★★☆

WHEN ASTROPHYSICIST Jin-Sook asks if the serial killer at the heart of this thriller miniseries is going to kill her, newspaper archivist Kirby answers, "He already has. Just not yet." Confused? That's kind of the point of this riveting reinvention of a creaky genre, which adds two crucial new elements: time travel and Elisabeth Moss. The twisty plot follows Moss' Kirby in the mid-Nineties as she and reporter Dan (Wagner Moura) look into decades-old murders similar to the attack she barely survived, all of which turn out to be the work of Harper (Jamie Bell), who looks the same in every era because he has access to a time machine. There are moments when *Shining Girls*, adapted by Silka Luisa from the novel by Lauren Beukes, lets our knowledge of Harper's powers get a bit too far ahead of Dan and Kirby's investigation, and others where it's hard to follow the plot, even when you know what the bad guy can do. More often than not, though, the confounding nature of the story only serves to put the viewer inside Kirby's head, and the great Moss and veteran *Breaking Bad* director Michelle MacLaren do the rest of the heavy lifting, giving this fantastical story a gripping heart. A.S.



Moss is stuck in the past and fearing the future.

FROM TOP: MIYA MIZUNO/FX; APPLE TV+

★★★★★ Classic | ★★★★ Excellent | ★★★ Good | ★★ Fair | ★ Poor

Skarsgård prepares to pillage a village with some pals.

Movies

FOR VIKING AND COUNTRY

Robert Eggers' brutal, bloody Norseman saga revisits an ancient tale of warriors, redemption, and revenge

The Northman

STARRING
Alexander Skarsgård
Nicole Kidman
Anya Taylor-Joy
Ethan Hawke
Claes Bang

DIRECTED BY
Robert Eggers

K. AUSTIN COLLINS

HE'S ONLY three features into his career, but Robert Eggers has rightfully earned a reputation for doing his research. *The Witch* (2015) was set in 17th-century New England, and the artisanal attention to authenticity and craft nearly overwhelmed the story. For *The Lighthouse* (2019), Eggers spent a good portion of the movie's budget on the construction of a 70-foot-tall lighthouse, the primary location for the movie's strange, confined story of isolated men and madness. None of which is remarkable on its own. (James Cameron built a partial model of the *Titanic* only to sink it.)

For this level of care to embed itself in our idea of the director, though, is something else – a feat of canny marketing and a sign of what genuinely seems to matter to the substance of his movies. Primarily set in the year 914, *The Northman* is his newest, biggest, most expensive and expansive film he's made yet. It's also his best film to date. Lawlessness rules the way: Spare us your Wild West and give us, instead, your wild, ravenous, revenge-seeking North.

The Northman of the title, Amleth, is but a boy when this story starts. His father, King Aurvandil (Ethan Hawke), is freshly home from battle – and suffering from a stark injury. "I watched his innocence tonight," the warring king says to his wife, Queen Gudrún (Nicole Kidman). It is time to initiate their boy into the ways of being king. Father and son crawl down into a cave, joining the fool of the kingdom, Heimir (a zany, senseless Willem Dafoe), in a howling, sputtering ritual of man-making, getting down on all fours like dogs as they inhale hallucinogenic smoke and recite some of the sayings of Odin.

Soon, the leader will be betrayed by his brother, Fjölnir (a royally maned Claes Bang); Amleth will be rendered into an orphan; his mother into the unwitting queen of the man who's stealing the kingdom. Fjölnir also thinks Amleth has been, as they say, taken care of. He's wrong. The boy will become an angry, muscled, scorched-earth man (Alexander Skarsgård, lean, mean, and shirtless). He befriends and falls for Olga (Anya Taylor-Joy); communes with ravens and wolves; wends his way through a series of challenges to his will and his power. He will soon be ready to avenge what he has lost.

You know where the story is going. From the outline of the plot, you can also guess where it came from. Amleth is a historical Viking warrior, described in 13th-century historian Saxo Grammaticus' *The History of the Danes*; the name also resembles Hamlet for a reason (Shakespeare was influenced by the violent hero's story). Even the obstacles and perks that fall into Amleth's path, such as the acquisition of a uniquely powerful sword, are a little deadened by easily guessed outcomes. And *The Northman*'s incisive sense of detail almost longs for something new. Eggers' movie is best when it dives into its mystical visions and unnameable powers. He abandons stylish modern crutches, like handheld cameras during his battle scenes, and instead resorts to smooth, eerie long takes, images that roam through the action with a patient eagerness to lap up the sights, soak in the bloodletting.

A recent profiler of Eggers described this as "the most accurate Viking movie ever made," and seems to mean this as a compliment. The truth is that Eggers pulls off something more interesting. He knows that the tales of Grammaticus and others were spun in a Christian era, heavily reliant upon prior stories and myths, but distanced from the tales' roots. The gap should feel a little more unhinged – a little more pagan, even. And the movie's rituals, its mystical visions, go quite a ways to getting there.

Still, more than anything, *The Northman* made me wonder what Eggers would do with a historically blank canvas: what it would look like for a more daringly original act of storytelling, divorced from old modes like the revenge plot or witchy self-discovery, to compete for primacy of place as one of his priorities. Eggers' sense of control lends itself to incredible visions, yet all that control winds up becoming a limit. It feels too linear to be entirely immersive. One can only imagine what if, like Amleth dreaming of Valhalla, Eggers really cut loose.

AIDAN MONAGHAN/NEW REGENCY PICTURES

MRBEAST

[*Cont. from 53*] I suggest MrBeast videos may present a cynical concept of charity, it touches a nerve. "Your concern literally isn't even a concern whatsoever," Donaldson says. "There's not millions of kids now doing good and filming it. There's just millions of kids who are doing good."

LIKE MANY ENTREPRENEURS, Donaldson does not have much by way of a personal life; or at least, he does not have any interest in portraying that he has one. He recently split from lifestyle influencer Maddy Spidell, who has appeared in a handful of his videos, and those in his circle told me that Spidell had been a positive influence, forcing Donaldson to prioritize work-life balance more. Donaldson did not want to comment on the record about the breakup, citing Spidell's privacy, yet Tyson says Donaldson's singular focus on work was a major contributing factor. "I think that's what he's going to be looking for next: somebody who can match his obsession with business and money and all that kind of stuff," he says.

Donaldson, however, is less interested in dating than he is in growing his brand: reaching 100 million subscribers, opening more MrBeast Burgers, becoming the most successful YouTuber of all time. Unlike many other creators, who crave acceptance from the mainstream entertainment establishment, he doesn't have any interest in obtaining Netflix deals or lucrative recording contracts; his only concern is building his influence on the platform that made him famous.

"I want to be the biggest YouTube channel ever," he says. "Not even for my ego. I don't know. I just want it. It just gives me something to strive for, to get out of bed and grind for. But it's also just vanity."

Surprisingly, for someone who is singularly obsessed with YouTube, Donaldson says he doesn't often watch YouTube videos anymore. Instead, he's become deeply consumed by the field of self-optimization. He installed a gym in the middle of his kitchen as a motivational tool, so he can work out instead of grabbing a snack. He regularly reads biographies of highly successful men, most recently finishing one about Michael Jordan. He's also hired a life coach, who told him that successful men peak at 40.

"At first I was like, 'You're fucking crazy,' " he says. "But I think I do believe it. [So] as long as you're staying physically fit, you're not wrinkly. And if you have money and stuff like that." If his life coach is right, Donaldson has more than a decade left until he hits his peak, and he will tolerate no distractions on his way there. He says that when renovations to the MrBeast LLC studio are complete, he'll have a shower installed in his office so he can keep working without having to go home. "I need to just obsess, grind, and keep going," he says. "If you're on an exponential growth curve, you don't want to let it flatline."

It's the kind of attitude that's led him to have the fifth most popular YouTube channel in the world. But, of course, he wants to be first. That's what the new, bigger studio, the crazy sets, the ever-more-elaborate stunts, the live sharks, the lime-green Lambos, the million dollar bills, and tens of millions more in the bank are all for, even if none of it feels like quite enough. "This is all I do, really," he says as we sit in the front seat of his Tesla. "I don't party. I barely have friends. And there is a risk: I look back when I'm 50 and I'm like, 'Damn, I literally only did that one thing and nothing else.' "

THE LAST TREASURE HUNT

[*Cont. from 73*] his parents where they were shot. It was his place alone.

That day, he pulled out a notebook and started sketching, using Kinsley as an easel while he traced the reefs of Bird Rock, Small Rock, and Flat Iron Rock, maybe 500 yards from Trinidad Beach. Kinsley knew better than to ask what he was drawing. She knew he had been working on a big project since a few months into their relationship, but not much more. He kept his ideas in a black notebook that never left his side. Hunter told Kinsley not to guess because it would ruin the surprise. She agreed.

They shared their dreams: Kinsley wanted to be a TV reporter, and Hunter, well, he wanted to do so many things. One time, Kinsley remembers, Hunter began talking about how he wanted to die.

"I want it to be while I'm doing something epic, maybe a plane crash or something."

FOR FOUR DAYS, Hunter watched with glee as his friends searched the area for clues, roaming from the mud of Humboldt State's Frisbee-golf course to a crevice in purportedly the world's tallest totem pole, in nearby McKinleyville. He'd help if the competitors wanted, telling his brother if he was getting hot or cold while searching for a clue on an abandoned railway bridge not far from their boyhood home. But then he'd vanish for hours, hiding the next round of clues all over the county, gunning his red Jeep up and down the 101. At night, he'd sit on the couch at his dad's house as Kinsley and his father tried to cadge hints out of him. He would just grin and shake his head no.

The hunt grew curiouser and curiouser. One of the second tier of clues was a link to a recording of Hunter playing the *Scooby-Doo* theme song. While Hunter filmed, Corey listened with Kinsley and said he didn't notice anything strange, but she had heard the song before, and this sounded different. Kinsley is deaf in one ear, so she heard the track in her own version of mono. Using an audio-edit-function app, she was able to isolate tracks and find one on which he had written on the file's spectrogram "S3 E12 2:00 Blue Lake." Hunter groaned, he meant for it to take much longer to solve.

Kinsley and Corey had formed an alliance, and they tried to figure out what the numbers meant: a secret code or an important date? They struggled for hours before Kinsley realized they were overthinking things. *Scooby-Doo* was one of their favorite shows. At two minutes into Season Three, Episode 12, Shaggy and Scooby are trying to build a treehouse sandcastle.

She happily shouted at Corey, "I've got it."

In front, shrouded by an evergreen, was an old treehouse that Hunter and Bodie had played in as boys. Kinsley feared the rotten tree, so she waited until morning. After breakfast, she began to climb the tree. Hunter filmed her and shouted encouragement. She entered the treehouse but found nothing.

"Just a little higher," shouted Hunter.

She stood up and pushed her hand through the rotting treehouse roof and saw a rope with a white key that Hunter made with his 3D printer. She climbed down the tree. Hunter gave her a hug.

"You were so brave. I knew you could do it."

On the key was a clue written in Braille. Corey and Kinsley went back inside and Googled a Braille alphabet and spent an hour spelling out the words: "From Isaac to Rene."

They knew Hunter loved science and math, and Isaac Newton and René Descartes were two of his heroes. But they were stuck. What did it mean?

Meanwhile, Hunter knew it was only a matter of time before the contestants would be closing in on the actual treasure. There was just one problem: He hadn't yet put it into place. He knew it was time to kick it into gear.

Kinsley and Corey never figured out the meaning of the "Isaac to Rene" clue. There was no one to give them a hint. Hunter was gone by then.

KINSLEY AND HUNTER woke up slowly on the morning of Dec. 30. The previous day had been epic. Kinsley had met up with Hunter's best friend Zane, and they decided to hunt down a riddle that had led them to the Frisbee-golf course on the campus of Humboldt State. Hunter tagged along for filming purposes, and laughed as they tried to decipher six numbers that Hunter had placed on target baskets on the course. Growing frustrated, they headed with Hunter in tow to another friend's house.

There, Zane looked at clues from the next tier, three pages of text from Hunter's favorite books: *The Fellowship of the Ring, The Martian,* and *Endurance,* the classic retelling of Ernest Shackelton and his crew's miraculous escape from the Antarctic. Zane remembered that the stranded Martian astronaut was able to communicate with Earth by substituting a series of number patterns for letters and words. He began using the code from the book and realized that the numbers spelled out "Pump Four," a water station in a dried-up creek at a different Frisbee-golf course.

They drove back, and in the dark walked with flashlights until they found six more numbers posted on the station. Zane deciphered them to mean "Under Four Bridge." They ran to the fourth hole and noticed a small walking bridge across a creek. Zane slid under and found a Mason jar. In it was a map of Trinidad Beach with a few words written in ornate letters: *Here at our favorite place, we looked out towards the waters. Where you held the key to my heart, and with it, unlocked the world beyond.*

It was nearly 10 p.m., so everyone headed back to the house. They would deal with the map tomorrow. That night, they played Hunty-opoly, a version of Monopoly that Kinsley had created for her boyfriend, with his favorite places – like the Long Beach Flying Club – standing in for Boardwalk. Before turning in, Hunter asked his dad if he could borrow his pickup truck in the morning so that Kinsley could drive his Jeep. Corey said sure, and everyone turned in.

In the morning, Hunter said goodbye before circling back to get another kiss from Kinsley.

"I love you."

She smiled.

"Be safe, be careful. I love you too."

Hunter walked over to the side of the house, where he lifted up a canoe that he and Corey had used on some river adventures. He walked by the kitchen window, where Corey's wife, Jessica, saw him load it into his dad's truck. She didn't give it a second thought.

Around 10 a.m., Kinsley took the map and met some friends of Hunter's at Zane's house. They then headed down to Trinidad Beach. For hours, they trudged along the beach looking at the map, but they didn't know what they were searching for. Kinsley sent Hunter a playful text detailing their frustration, but, strangely, he didn't respond. A little later, she and Zane noticed Corey's truck and decided to leave Trinidad Beach. They didn't want Hunter to think

they were spying on him. After some more wanderings and another unanswered text, they drove back to Trinidad. Corey's truck was still there. The winter sun was setting, and Kinsley grew concerned. They noticed Hunter's phone was on the front seat. That's when Kinsley called Corey and told him she was at the truck but there was no sign of Hunter.

He immediately called the police. Then he asked Jessica if she had seen Hunter that morning. She told him she saw him loading the family canoe into the truck. Corey immediately put it together. He jumped into his car and just kept saying "No, no, no, no."

THE NEXT TWO DAYS were an agonizing blur. An impromptu search crew put on headlamps and scoured the beach in the blackness that first night. Kinsley went back to the house around midnight. She sat on the bed holding one of Hunter's sweatshirts – she knew he would be cold when they found him – and waited until it was 6 a.m. in Massachusetts, then called her mother. Kinsley's mom had a hard time understanding her daughter because Kinsley was crying so hard. She promised to get on a flight as soon as she could.

Hundreds of locals mobilized and began scouring nearby beaches and coves, some that could only be accessed with climbing ropes. Helicopters hovered overhead and divers searched the sea. But Corey didn't have much hope. The day Hunter disappeared had been cold, the water was frigid, and Hunter didn't take his wet suit.

His last hope was extinguished when another boater reported seeing Hunter paddling out of Trinidad Harbor, turning around the point and heading into unprotected waters. The next day, Corey hired a boat and headed in the direction where Hunter was last seen. The boat bobbed as it approached Flatiron Rock. Corey asked the captain if he could get closer.

"I can't – there's rocks just under the water that will tear us apart."

Later that afternoon, a call came into Corey. Shards of the canoe had been found on an inaccessible beach, about a half-mile away.

Corey and Kinsley talked the next morning. They were exhausted from grief and knew they didn't want to be the ones who found Hunter if his body washed ashore. Instead they decided to solve the Lewis treasure. But all they had was the map and the key with the Newton and Descartes clue. They walked the hills around Trinidad Beach for hours. Still nothing.

They wandered the beach area for six hours. Then Kinsley remembered the day Hunter took her to his secret place. She told Corey that maybe if they found it, maybe that would help. They drove the back roads for a few minutes before Kinsley told Corey to stop the car. The area looked familiar. They walked on a trail and then tramped through weeds and under trees before emerging at a cliff's end.

In front of Kinsley was the same view she had seen with Hunter. Kinsley and Corey looked at the ocean, the sun, and three distant rocks a few hundred yards offshore. Instinctively, Corey pulled out the key. He held it in front of him. The key's nubs lined up with the two smaller rocks. The keyhole gave him an unobstructed view of Flatiron Rock. And instantly he knew what had happened: His boy had paddled out toward the rock to stash the final treasure.

The frail canoe either capsized or broke up on the reefs. Hunter wouldn't have survived 15 minutes in the icy waters. All Corey could think was "Why?"

"He knew that the area around Flat Iron Rock was dangerous. We'd been talking about how crazy the ocean could turn since he was a little boy," Corey tells me. "I don't know why he would take such a risk."

But Corey also knew what Hunter would say.

"Why not?"

It provided no consolation.

I ALMOST DIDN'T write this story. It was simultaneously too sad and too cinematic. I worried that everyone would concentrate on the ingenious and, yes, the joy of the treasure hunt. They would skim over the fact that a promising young man made a terrible mistake that will forever haunt his family and friends. I talk to Corey about it, and he admits he fell victim to it as well. Friends have asked him who should play him in the inevitable movie version of Hunter's life.

"It's fun for a minute," says Corey. "And then I remember that I won't ever see him again, and it kills me."

I had some personal experience with this. My father was a Navy pilot who was killed in a plane crash off the *USS Kitty Hawk* in the Indian Ocean when I was 13. All I heard was that my father died doing something he loved more than life itself. Later, I learned he was probably flying too low and too fast for the conditions. My family was left with nothing but a folded American flag and a marker at Arlington National Cemetery.

Those memories sometimes overwhelmed me as I thought about Hunter. It left me sleepless, obsessing over my eight-year-old son's safety, and with writer's block for the first time in my life.

I kept flashing back to the day Corey took me, Micki, and his parents up to Hunter's spot. We trudged across the same trail Hunter did, pushing the same brush and branches out of our eyes before emerging into his Eden.

We all gasped at the beauty. I held the key up and saw how it aligned with Flatiron Rock. It was a half-mile offshore, but looked tantalizingly close to the beach from here. His grandmother smiled as she gazed into the distance.

"Someone asked me about him taking risks, and I said, 'Hey, he's a Lewis.' "

Micki joked that she would come back and hang up a hammock and live there. We made small talk about Hunter, and Micki said she was rereading *The Martian* and *Endurance*.

"Hunter loved these stories of amazing journeys where everyone is a hero and makes a great escape," Micki said, her voice cracking. "But Hunter didn't escape, he didn't come back." We all fell silent and just listened to the waves and the wind rushing through the trees.

I talked to Corey a couple of weeks after I left Humboldt County. He told me he recently returned to Hunter's place by himself and had a conversation with his son.

"Hunter, why did you have to go out in the canoe? Why did you have to die? We had so much more to do."

"*Would you like me to take a year and die from cancer? Or die in a meaningless car crash? Or be a victim and make someone else a villain and ruin their life?*"

"But Hunter, why so soon? We had so many things left to do."

"*Dad, I went in the most epic, beautiful way possible. And I kept you all in the dark. I kept it all a secret from you. So none of you could blame yourself. And now I am the Lost Lewis treasure forever.*"

Then Corey got into his son's Jeep and drove home. ®

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Jon Hamm

The actor on life after 'Mad Men' and the time he shoplifted 'Fletch' books

You were 15 when *Top Gun* came out. What did you think of it?
I did multiple viewings in the theater, and then the copy at my local video store was pretty worn out. It was so cool. Tom Cruise was in that sweet spot where we all saw the writing on the wall as to what he was about to become. And it seemed like every shot was at sunset and everybody was sweating just enough to look extra awesome.

Hamm appears in 'Top Gun: Maverick,' in theaters May 27.

As *Mad Men* was winding down, what did you want your career afterward to look like?
You have this legacy, right? That never goes away. So mostly, it's "What do you want to make of the rest of it?" I've had an incredibly fortunate run, and to get to do things that I've always wanted to do, like be in a *Top Gun* movie, host *SNL,* work with people whose work I totally respect, like Tina Fey and Amy Poehler and Kristen Wiig. . . . I'm not chasing accolades or anything like that. I've had my fair share, and I feel like I earned them. Mostly, I just want to do things that I would want to go see.

You became famous for drama, but go out of your way to do a lot of comedy.
It always feels nice to be invited to play in that sandbox. Whether it's Tina Fey or Larry David or Bill Hader, those people are all operating at a very high level. I just got off a podcast with Dana Carvey and David Spade, and I'm like, "Oh, my God. I watched you guys from my friend's basement." It's the Sally Field thing, right? "You actually like me. That's very cool. Thank you."

Where did that love of comedy come from?
I would go to the library and check out the comedy albums, and to my mother's consternation, it was Richard Pryor and Cheech and Chong. . . . I'm sure that I didn't get half of the jokes, but I got the pace and the rhythms, and I knew that was what jokes sounded like. And I was very aware that those people put a lot of time into how that comes across.

What did you do to pay the bills before you started acting regularly?
Anything I could. My first steady gig was at a restaurant down in Venice. Within a few weeks of me starting, Darren [Pettie], the guy who worked the raw bar, was quitting to go to Julliard, and suggested I do his job. I don't hear from him until I'm shooting day one of the pilot of *Mad Men,* where he played [Sterling Cooper client] Lee Garner Jr. We saw each other in the makeup trailer, and he goes, "Who are you playing?" And I said, "Don Draper." He goes, "Oh, my God, that's great."

Your mother died when you were 10, and your father died when you were 20. Have you ever thought about whether you would have moved out to L.A. to become an actor if one or both of your parents had still been around?
It's the sliding doors of it all, right? Mostly I think about it in the sense that I wish they could see what I've been able to make out of my life. But I have my aunt, my uncle, and my other aunt. And I have extended family that have gotten to experience this with me, and my sisters, and my nieces, and my great-nephews and great-nieces. But, yeah, your mom and dad are your mom and dad. There's never a good time to lose a parent. But I've got pictures.

You're playing Fletch in a new movie. When did you first encounter the character?
I saw the Chevy Chase movie, and it said in the credits it was based on a book. I went to Waldenbooks in the mall, and they had half a row of them on a shelf. I just thought, "Oh, man, are you kidding me? I need eight of this!" I didn't have any money, so I shoplifted them. I think the statute of limitations has run out, but I owe Waldenbooks $35 plus interest.

What's the best advice anyone ever gave you?
Show up on time and be prepared. That was my high school acting teacher. And I can't say that I've always done that, but I am a ridiculously punctual person. Those two things are pretty good lessons, not just for actors, but for anybody, to really be cognizant of other people's time and be aware of your own as well. Demand what you need. And there's a right way and wrong way of doing a lot of things; try to always be on the right side of that collision. **ALAN SEPINWALL**

ILLUSTRATION BY **Mark Summers**

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